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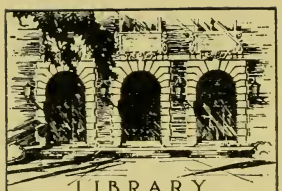

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VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK

A NOVEL

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF "THE COUNTESS RADNA," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1894

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VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WISDOM OF JOSEPH.

WHICH of us, if we lived in a Palace of Truth, would not have to confess, to his shame, that there have been moments when he has rejoiced to see the retreating backs of his best friends? One's best friends, animated by the best intentions, have, unhappily, a way of sometimes behaving very like one's worst enemies; and it was, therefore, with heartfelt relief that Horace Trevor heard Lord Chippenham say—

"Well, my dear boy, I am sorry to have to make a bolt for it just as you arrive, but I was due on the other side of England a week ago, and I have only remained at my post because Julia begged me to do

so until you came to relieve guard." He added significantly, "I hope and trust that she will have some good news to send me about you before long. I don't want to interfere; you must settle it among you in your own way, but what the dickens is the object of this delay is more than I can understand."

Horace took very good care not to enlighten him. One great comfort was that his impatience did not appear to be shared by Mrs. Mansfield, who maintained a discreet reserve and loyally kept her promise of troubling her nephew no further, although it was easy to perceive that she had not abandoned all hope. Mrs. Mansfield, indeed, had the wit to realise that if the young man could only be kept long enough at Broxham, the situation would become such that there would be practically only one way out of it.

But this was a view of the matter which suggested itself neither to Horace nor to Veronica. Each being very far from comprehending the other, they speedily dropped back into their former pleasant relations, which could not possibly have been resumed, had they been less blind, and for some little time, at all events, they failed to notice that everybody with whom they were brought into con-

tact regarded their ultimate marriage as a foregone conclusion. Horace and the other men who were staying in the house shot all day and every day; in the evenings there were but few opportunities for private intercourse, and when Veronica did happen to get him alone for a few minutes, she generally profited by the occasion to consult him upon some point connected with the management of the property which she hoped to transfer to him before he should be much older. It was encouraging to find that he took a keen interest in such questions; nor did she ever neglect to mention how profoundly uninteresting they were to her.

Deferred hope had, however, to be submitted to a little longer; for Dolly Cradock, who had been promptly communicated with, wrote to say that she would not be available just yet. "I have a few engagements which promise rather too well to be sacrificed," she explained; "but I will be with you before the frost sets in, unless the climate plays us some nasty trick. My love to your cousin Horace. I hear he is having a rare time of it at Broxham, bossing the whole show and inviting squads of men to be entertained by you. Tell him not to go away before I come, and to find me a mount of some sort.

I will say for him that he knows something about horses, but I don't believe much in his shooting. Still, I dare say his friends help him to make up a respectable bag, and he must enjoy giving orders where he used to receive them. I hope he reads family prayers morning and evening in obedience to the traditions of the house; or do you undertake that part of the business?"

Veronica did not deliver the above message, nor did she think it necessary to inform Horace that she expected the pleasure of a visit from Miss Cradock. She had an impression—which happened to be perfectly correct—that he would not like her having invited Dolly to meet him. For her own part, she found this country-house existence, which gave her all the advantages of proprietorship without its worries and responsibilities, much pleasanter than she had anticipated. It was enjoyable in itself, and seemed to afford a fitting sequel to her London experiences. From the moment when she had come so unexpectedly into her inheritance there had been a sense of unreality about everything that had occurred to her which had not been without a certain charm. It had been rather like reading a novel or a play, which may temporarily excite one's emotions but

which has nothing in the world to do with one's actual life. Some day soon she would shake herself free of it all and consider practical plans for the future; at present there was no occasion for her to trouble herself in that way.

What gave her great satisfaction was that Joe, who had obtained leave to absent himself from his agricultural studies for a fortnight, and who journeyed down from Lincolnshire in November, struck up an immediate and fast friendship with Horace. She had not left the future to take care of itself so absolutely but that she had felt certain qualms of conscience respecting Joe, and she was most anxious that the young fellow should be upon terms of intimacy with the coming owner of Broxham Hall. It was, accordingly, very consolatory to be assured in emphatic language by one who had the highest confidence in his own judgment that Horace Trevor was one in a thousand; while it was perhaps even more agreeable to hear Horace's own verdict upon a youth who, notwithstanding his many admirable qualities, could scarcely be called prepossessing in appearance.

"That is a capital boy!" Horace said. "He knows a lot, and he isn't a bit conceited about his

knowledge either. A first-rate huntsman was lost when he came into the world as the son of a country parson, I can tell you. I took him over to the kennels yesterday, and I was simply amazed at the way in which he picked out the best hounds. He didn't require to be told which of them were straight —and, between you and me, they ain't all of them straight."

"They might all of them be as crooked as rams' horns for anything that I should know by looking at them," answered Veronica, laughing; "but I think I can generally tell whether a man is what you call 'straight' or not, and I am sure that epithet applies to Joe. I am so glad you appreciate him. You know I always told you that he was like you."

"Oh, he's my superior by a long way,' said Horace seriously, without noticing the implied compliment. "That is, except as regards horsemanship —which he'll soon learn. Going to be a land agent, he tells me."

"Well, we hope so. In fact, I dare say he would be mine, if——" Veronica paused for a moment, and then added, "If I hadn't got one already."

"Sutton is a good man," remarked Horace meditatively; "but he isn't as young as he used to be,

and he is well enough off to live upon his income. I should think that his shoes might be vacant by the time that our friend Joe is ready to step into them."

That was so exactly what Veronica had wanted him to say that she had much ado to refrain from thanking him. She felt that if only she could see some prospect of Joe's being adequately provided for, the rest would concern herself alone. Your friends may think you an idiot for throwing your money into the sea or bestowing it upon a hospital, but they cannot with any justice reproach you for doing as you please with your own.

But although, upon the whole, things seemed to be moving smoothly towards the desired climax, and although Horace continued to behave in every respect as she would have wished, it did, as time went on, dawn upon her that his actual position under her roof was open to misconstruction. Hints ended by reaching her ears; servants' gossip was inevitably reported to her; visitors, in the innocence of their hearts, made arch or facetious little speeches; finally, the Vicar's wife, a foolish, harmless old creature who often dropped in to discuss parochial matters, must needs ask point-blank whether the

wedding was to take place in Broxham or in London. Veronica astonished her very much, but obviously failed to overcome her incredulity, by replying that the wedding alluded to was not going to take place anywhere. She said—

"Oh, my dear Miss Dimsdale, if that is really the case, I am very sorry to hear it—very sorry indeed. And so, I am sure, will everybody else be. If you will forgive a woman who is old enough to be your mother for saying so, it was hardly fair to treat the poor young man as you have treated him unless you meant what we all supposed that you did."

That ignorant rebuke was all the more provoking because it was certain to be echoed by Aunt Julia and Lord Chippenham, not to mention the rest of Veronica's little world. "I can't be thankful enough," she said to herself rather impatiently, "that there is a Dolly Cradock in the field. But for her, I really believe I should be driven to marry Horace against his will. I wish she would make haste about coming here—this can't be allowed to go on much longer."

Horace, for different reasons, was rapidly approaching a similar conviction. Knowing that it was quite out of the question for him to ask Veronica to be his wife, and having heard from her own lips

that he would most assuredly be rejected even if he did, he had long ago decided that his incipient love for her was a sentiment which must be nipped in the bud; and what with fishing, yachting, and shooting, he had, as he fondly imagined, pretty effectually nipped it. But he ought never to have been so imprudent as to yield to Aunt Julia's solicitations and establish himself upon his present footing at Broxham. What had been the result of this misplaced confidence in his self-control; of this uncalled-for playing into the hands of officious well-wishers; of this valorous determination to fall in with Veronica's own wishes and look as if he liked it? Why, simply that the bud had burst into full bloom; that, instead of being a little in love with her (as he had been with many others before her) he now worshipped the very ground she trod upon; that every day and every hour he was in danger of betraying himself, and that more than once he had surprised himself in the criminal act of wondering whether, after all, he was bound as an honourable man to abandon all hope. To have reached the point of contemplating what he and she had agreed to regard as a moral impossibility was more than perilous: it must be taken as a sign that the only course remain-

ing open to him was to flourish a clean pair of heels in the face of temptation.

Now it came to pass that one afternoon, when he was in rather low spirits and had been inwardly debating with himself what plausible excuse he could make for abruptly taking himself off, Joe and he went out together for an hour of desultory shooting. It happened that there was just then a break in the flow of Mrs. Mansfield's guests; the coverts were to be left undisturbed for a time; nobody's amusement had to be catered for; and Horace, true to the resolution which he had formed of avoiding Veronica's society as far as was consistent with politeness, quitted the house immediately after luncheon, accompanied by his young friend, who was always ready for sport in any shape or form. After knocking over a few rabbits, they proceeded to some marshy ground, where Joe brought down a couple of snipe cleverly enough; but Horace, never at the best of times a first-class shot, missed everything, and was at length seriously remonstrated with by his companion.

"Do you mean to go on like this?" Joe inquired in sorrowful accents. "Because, if you do, it seems to me that we may as well get back home and play

billiards. Not that you're fit to play anything in your present condition. What's wrong with you, if one may make so bold as to ask?—liver or mental distress?"

"I have never been conscious of having a liver in my life," answered Horace. "As for mental distress—well, you're old enough to understand that I must have reasons for being a bit worried at times."

Joe scrutinised the other's perturbed countenance for a moment with a whimsical expression upon his own, and then, withdrawing the cartridges from his gun, deliberately sat down upon the trunk of a fallen tree.

"We won't shoot any more; we'll smoke a quiet pipe," said he. "I'm old enough for anything, and wise beyond my years, as you may have noticed. In fact, I have heard you admit as much. Well, such is my wisdom that, without requiring to be told, I know perfectly well what is the matter with you."

"You do, do you?" returned Horace, with a rather dreary, incredulous laugh, as he obeyed the self-confident youth's invitation.

"I do. Moreover, I don't claim any great credit for the discovery, which might have been made by

anybody with eyes and ears and a moderate amount of intelligence. It isn't that you are a poor man instead of being a rich one, as you naturally expected to be by this time; it isn't that you are beginning to kick against a false position——"

"Yes, it is!" interrupted Horace.

"Kindly allow me to finish my remarks. I was going to say that it is simply that you have lost your heart to the very person whom of course you ought to marry, and that you daren't tell her so for fear she shouldn't believe you. Now, that is sheer foolishness, and——"

"You cheeky boy! What do you mean by lecturing your elders and betters in this way?" interrupted Horace again, though in truth he was not very sorry to be furnished with a confidant. "You are not altogether wrong, I'll allow; but you don't know quite as much as you think."

"I shall be pleased to listen to anything more that you may have to tell me upon the subject," answered Joe blandly.

Horace needed no pressing. Without wasting time or words over it he unfolded his lamentable case, relating how Veronica and he had agreed at the outset to be friends and nothing more; how, in

spite of that agreement, he had found himself falling in love with her; how she had at once discovered his unwilling treachery, and had let him know in the plainest terms what she thought of it; how he had valiantly attempted to conquer a hopeless passion, and how he had, for the second time, ignominiously failed. "So you see," he concluded, "I must get out of this before I make an even greater fool of myself than I have done already. And I'm sorry for it, because I know there will be a fuss with Aunt Julia, and most likely I shall have to confess the whole truth."

"Best thing you can do," observed Joe laconically. "You haven't confessed the whole truth yet, you know."

"What do you mean?" asked the other, staring. "I have confessed it to Veronica, at all events."

"Oh, no; that's just what you haven't done. You have never asked her to marry you."

"Of course I haven't. For one thing, I don't want to marry her, and for another thing, she has told me, without waiting to be asked, that she wouldn't marry me if I were the only man in the world."

"Ah! but in cases of this kind the best of women

tell fibs. They feel bound to do it, just as they feel bound to say that they wouldn't have accepted an invitation to dinner which hadn't reached them. Now, look here, Trevor: I don't set up to be much of an authority upon falling in love; the whole thing seems to me to be rather rot and to make people unfit for decent society while it lasts; but I suppose it is a calamity which is sure to come upon us all sooner or later, and when it attacks me I hope I shall have common sense enough to go straight to the young woman and tell her what is the matter. She may object to red hair, in which case I shall know where I am and wish her good-morning; but I shan't be quite such a muff as to turn tail without firing a shot. As for your not wanting to marry Veronica, you had better tell that to somebody who has been more lucky than your humble servant and has obtained a commission in the marines. What you really mean is that you are afraid she will think you want her money, not herself—which is a precious poor compliment to pay to her understanding. You may take my word for it that if Veronica refuses you, it will be only because she doesn't care enough for you to be your wife. But I don't myself think that she will refuse you."

"My dear boy, you know nothing at all about it," said Horace.

"That's what remains to be seen. Anyhow, I've given you the soundest of sound advice. There's nothing disgraceful in falling in love with an heiress, and, as far as I can make out, very few men think that there's anything disgraceful in marrying an heiress without falling in love with her; but upon my word, I think it's rather disgraceful to slink off silently because you funk an accusation which no woman in her senses would be likely to make. *Dixi!* Now we'll go home before we catch colds in our heads. By-the-way, there's just one more thing which I had better warn you of, perhaps. When Veronica accepts you—as she will—the odds are that she won't give her real reason for accepting you. You mustn't mind that; it's only another little way that women have, and after you have been married a few days, she'll own that she wasn't absolutely candid about it at the time."

CHAPTER XV.

VERONICA'S REPLY.

No man can give clearer proof that he possesses a well-balanced mind than by showing himself ready to listen to the opinions of his juniors, who may not be as experienced as he, yet may quite possibly be more acute; and it is noticeable that the greatest generals, statesmen, and other leaders of their fellow-mortals have always displayed this modest toleration. Only dull people are under the delusion that they necessarily become more clever as they grow older. Horace Trevor, therefore, being modest enough to believe that he was very dull indeed, thought it quite upon the cards that Joe Dimsdale might take the right view of the situation (at all events in so far as it behoved him to fire a shot before running away), and he would have been glad to pursue the subject as he strolled

homewards with his juvenile but sapient adviser. But Joe, who had said all that he had to say, preferred to discuss the best means to be adopted for discouraging the use of barbed wire—a very serious question, as to which he had ideas of his own and desired to promulgate them. He said—

"What you have to make up your minds to is that there must be no difficulty about the damage fund. Of course, claims are sent in for turkeys that never were hatched and gates and hurdles that never existed, but it's a good deal cheaper to pay what you don't owe than to have your neck broken and your best hounds killed. It isn't a bit of good to tell farmers that hunting brings money into the country; you must have a civil word for each of them when they come out and you mustn't ask too many questions about their losses. Once get them on your side, and you won't be bothered with that murderous wire, the inventor of which, I grant you, would be flayed alive if he got his deserts."

To these and other sage observations of a like nature Horace returned an absent-minded assent. His eyes were wandering hither and thither across the gray, level landscape, as if in search of something, although he had no conscious anticipation of

discerning the tall feminine figure which presently came within the range of his vision. But when he saw that it was really Veronica who was approaching them—and who, as a matter of fact, was on her way home from the village, after fulfilling one of her duties by visiting the poor—he was seized with an absurd panic and would fain have taken to his heels. After what had passed, it seemed to him that he must at once act upon the advice that he had received; so he said hurriedly: "Stick to me, there's a good chap! I ain't ready yet."

Joe stared, and then burst out laughing; but he had no time to give the required promise—or, at any rate, he didn't give it—before Veronica was within earshot and raised her voice to inquire what sport they had had.

"Middling, my dear, only middling, I am sorry to tell you," he replied. "Trevor is no use this afternoon, and it saddens me to shoot with a man who is no use; so we're toddling home, although the light will last for a good three-quarters of an hour more."

"I am glad of that," remarked Veronica, drawing nearer and joining them; "I am always glad when the poor birds get off, even if it only means that

they will live to die another day. Why can't you shoot at glass balls or clay pigeons? They are quite as difficult to hit, aren't they?"

"A pigeon-shot is one thing and a game-shot is another," answered Joe didactically. "You might just as well say that it is as difficult to write prose as poetry, by way of putting the extinguisher upon all poets—and I dare say strength would be given me to bear it if you did extinguish the lot. Now, I'll tell you what it is, Veronica: you know you can't convert me, because you have so often tried, without a shred of success. Suppose you bring your powerful arguments to bear upon Trevor, who has an open mind—because he isn't really fond of shooting at all—while I nip back for half an hour and see whether I can't bring conviction home to a few more snipe."

The faithless young reprobate strode off then and there. He even had the impudence to glance back over his shoulder with a wink at the comrade whom he had thus basely left in the lurch, and who gave a great gasp of despair.

But Veronica, innocent of this by-play, was very willing to let him depart in peace. During the earlier part of the afternoon she had been thinking

that she ought to let Horace know how completely their amicable understanding had been misinterpreted by the general public, and this appeared to be as good an opportunity as another for setting him upon his guard. However, she had not yet hit upon an easy and natural method of leading up to the subject when he forestalled her by blurting out—

"I say!—I'm afraid I shall have to leave you before long. I've enjoyed myself awfully, and I'm sure you have done all you could to give me a real good time of it; but—but, in fact, I find it won't do!"

"I hope," said Veronica, her face clouding over a little, "that you are not going back to the old ridiculous mistake that you made in London."

"Oh, well, if you call it a mistake!——"

"It *was* a mistake," Veronica asserted, rather fiercely; "you might accept my word for that, I think. Surely I ought to know!"

"I don't doubt your word; I never doubted it for a moment," returned Horace. "As far as that goes, I am not sure that I ever made the mistake you mean. Still, you know——"

"I know that everybody assumes we are either

engaged to be married or going to be engaged, and I was going to speak to you about it. It is very unpleasant, and, for some reasons, I should not be at all sorry if you were to go away soon. Only there are other reasons which make me wish that you could stay a little longer."

"I'm useful, I suppose," said Horace, a trifle bitterly. "Aunt Julia is never weary of telling me how useful I am. Well, goodness knows I ask nothing better than to be of use to you. All the same, I doubt whether it's quite honest, and I'm beginning to feel that it's quite impossible, to keep up this pretence."

"I am with you there," agreed Veronica more composedly. "I think it has gone on long enough, and we should have done better never to let it begin; but what is to be done? Shall I speak to Aunt Julia or will you?"

"I don't care a brass farthing what Aunt Julia may believe or wish for," the young man returned. "You don't seem to understand what I mean. The intolerable thing to me is that I have been keeping up, or trying to keep up, a pretence with *you*. Upon my honour, I wouldn't have come here when you asked me if I hadn't thought it would be all

right; but—it isn't all right, Veronica, and I ought to have known that it wouldn't be. I'm very sorry for it, that's all I can say. After all, I don't see that I am so very much to blame."

Veronica stood still, and wonderingly took stock of her agitated companion. His fatuity seemed almost incredible; yet if he did not mean that he was still solicitous lest her maiden affections should have been bestowed upon one who was unable to reciprocate them, it was difficult to comprehend what he did mean.

"What *are* you talking about?" she asked at length.

"I suppose you know," he answered; "it is the old mistake, as you are pleased to call it. My idea was that, after having been away all this time, I should be able to do as you wished and behave as if nothing had happened; but really it's more than flesh and blood can stand! We shall still be friends, I hope—why shouldn't we?—but I can't stay under your roof and eat your bread any longer. At any rate, not for the present. I can't let you suppose that I have changed, or shall ever change. Joe has been favouring me with his advice this afternoon, and I believe he is right. I ought to

propose to you in due form and be rejected in due form. Then it will be only the natural and proper thing for me to go away and remain away until—until you marry some other fellow."

"I can't imagine," said Veronica loftily, "what reason Joe can have had for giving you such advice as that. Why is it necessary for you to be rejected, and why should it be necessary for you to propose to me?"

"Only because I love you," returned Horace, turning rather red in the face (for he thought she might have been a little more kind to him, considering the painful predicament in which he was placed). "I take it that most people would consider that a sufficient reason."

Veronica started away from his side with a quick gesture of dismay.

"Oh, Horace!" she exclaimed, "you don't really mean that, do you? What a dreadfully unfortunate complication it would make if it were true!"

"Mean it!" he returned, a little resentfully. "As if you didn't know that I meant it! Didn't you tell me so in London, when you said that you were disappointed in me, and that we were to consider the whole incident wiped out, and all that? Well,

the long and the short of it is that I have done my best to oblige you and that I haven't succeeded. You are the only woman in the world for me, Veronica, and you have told me already that if I were the only man in the world you wouldn't marry me. All you have to do now is to say that again, and I'll be off to-morrow morning. It is better for you and better for me that the truth should be put into plain words which can be repeated to other people. Then everybody will feel that there is no more to be said."

"But, indeed, there is a great deal more to be said," Veronica declared. "You have so taken me by surprise that I hardly know how or where to begin; and if I did not thoroughly trust you—however, I am sure I may trust you. It was I who made a mistake in London. I thought, when you spoke, that you were alluding to something altogether different. I thought — was I really wrong?—that the woman whom you would marry, if you could afford to marry her, was Dolly Cradock."

"Dolly Cradock!" ejaculated Horace scornfully; and the fact is that, at the moment, he had no recollection at all of those tender passages by the

light of the moon which had been recorded against him.

"Yes; I certainly thought so, and I have based all my projects upon that presumption. She is coming here soon, and I may as well tell you now that I counted upon her to help me in bringing about my heart's desire, which is to see you established where you ought to be—as master of all this land. Don't interrupt; I quite understand that you wouldn't accept it as a gift from me, but you might have been induced to accept it—at any rate, I hoped you would—as a sort of marriage-portion, without which you would have had to relinquish her. And now the relinquishing will have to be done by me, for I must give up my scheme. Oh! there is no need for you to tell me that. You would never have said that you loved me unless it had been a fact—only it is a most unfortunate and vexatious fact."

Unquestionably it was, and Horace could not but feel it to be so, although he deemed it due to himself to explain quite clearly to Veronica that under no imaginable circumstances could he have consented to deprive her of an acre of the land upon which they were standing. He wound up a forcible statement to that effect by remarking—

"I don't know what extraordinary notions you can have taken into your head, or what you can have supposed that I have been driving at all this time; but I am glad, at least, that you don't doubt my love. Most girls would have suspected that I had been a humbug from first to last, and that the property was what I had had my eye upon all along; and I shouldn't have been entitled to reproach you if you had been like most girls. But, of course, you aren't," he concluded with a sigh.

Veronica walked on for some twenty or thirty yards without speaking. "So this was what you meant me to understand that day when you came to lunch in South Audley Street!" she ejaculated at length—and, somehow, the explanation was not wholly unpleasant to her. "What an ungrateful wretch you must have thought me!"

"Oh, no, Veronica; I didn't think that," he answered, laughing a little; "it was hardly a case for gratitude, was it? But I confess that I did think you were rather more severe with me than I had deserved. One can't very well help these things, you see, and as soon as ever I realised my danger, I tried to give you a wide berth. What, of

course, I had no business to do was to come here; but, as I said before, I honestly believed it would be all right. And now I can't help agreeing with Joe that the most straightforward plan is to speak out. You refuse me, I take myself off, and there's an end of it."

"Did Joe assume that I should refuse you?" Veronica inquired.

"Well, no; to tell you the truth he didn't. He is only a boy, and you can no more expect him to look at the matter from our point of view than you can expect it of Aunt Julia and the General, who are old and more or less sensible. Naturally, he sees what they see—that our marriage would make things very comfortable all round."

"But that is just what I have always seen myself," observed Veronica reflectively. "I treated it as being out of the question because I was persuaded that you really cared for Dolly Cradock; but if you are sure—*quite* sure—that it is not so, it would make a difference."

"A difference!" gasped the young man, who could hardly believe his ears. "Oh, Veronica, is it possible—do you actually mean that you could care for me enough to marry me?"

Veronica smiled. "Why not?" she asked. "I care a great deal for you—more than I do for anybody else, I think, except, perhaps, Joseph. Ah! but stop a moment!" she continued, as Horace let his gun slip from his grasp and made a sudden attempt to seize her by both hands. "Hear me out before you make up your mind to accept all I have to offer. I am not in love with you; I don't even know what the sensation means. Yes, you may look incredulous, but it is a fact that I have never been in love in my life, and although I dare say no man of my age is in the same case, probably a good many girls are. It would be better if I could say that I have lost my heart to you; but there is no use in saying what is not true. Can you be satisfied with a promise that I will try to be a good wife to you and that I like you well enough to be extremely happy with you?"

It is doubtful whether such terms have ever yet been rejected by an ardent lover. Who does not hope for the best and feel a slight complacent confidence in himself when he is assured that he has no rival? What might have given Horace pause was the reflection that the other party to this somewhat one-sided bargain was just the sort of person

to disregard her own wishes and interests; but one cannot think of everything at a moment's notice, and there was only room in his mind for an immense thankfulness. The woman whom he adored was willing to marry him!—what remained but to execute capers and indulge in demonstrations which had to be promptly checked?

Veronica said that there must not be anything of that kind, please. This was not a love-match—at any rate, she could not personally regard it in that light yet—and she hoped he would be kind enough not to alter his demeanour towards her in any way for the present.

"I am very glad that you care for me, and very much flattered," she declared, "for the looking-glass tells me every morning how few attractions I have; but I can't make myself feel what I don't feel. You must have patience with me."

Horace did not hesitate to affirm that his patience would be found equal to that of Job. It never occurred to him to ask why, under the circumstances, she should consent to become his wife; nor, oddly enough, did he make any allusion to the money and lands over which he would now exercise the rights of mastership.

In this last particular, however, his instincts were probably sound. Veronica knew very well that he was not actuated by sordid motives, and she would most likely have been hurt if he had thought it needful to enter a plea of "Not Guilty."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE UNDESIRABLE GUEST.

A joyous and exultant woman was Mrs. Mansfield that evening. She said to herself, and she took pen and paper forthwith for the purpose of saying through the post to Lord Chippenham, that she had known quite well all along how it would be. Nothing had been required except a little judicious management and masterly inaction, both of which excellent methods she ventured to think she had employed with success. Veronica, no doubt, was a difficult subject for experiment, and Horace (by reason of his exaggerated conscientiousness) not so easy as the general run of young men; still they had both been made to walk along the track marked out for them by Providence, and, for all her natural modesty, she could not but recognise that Providence had found in her a valuable auxiliary. But

in speaking to the bride-elect she was careful to abstain from any approach to boastfulness.

"You have made your own choice, my dear, and in my opinion you have chosen most wisely," was all that she said, after the embracings appropriate to the occasion had been gone through. To which Veronica responded demurely, "I was sure you would think so."

"No one knowing Horace Trevor as well as I do could help thinking so. Even poor dear Samuel did not contrive to make him turn out badly; although, with the restrictions that were placed upon him, he might have been expected to run as wild as the son of an Evangelical clergyman. You will have one of the very best husbands in England, Veronica, and I only hope you appreciate your good luck. The one thing that I should make so bold as to recommend—because it is always best that the husband should be master—is that you should transfer your estate to him on your wedding day. But of course you will do as you please about that."

Veronica fully intended to act in the manner suggested, and she had no doubt at all that her future lord and master would prove a kind one. To be sure, she was not in love with him, nor was she

able to regard him with any special veneration; but these were trifles in comparison with the really important and most fortunate fact that he had become enamoured of her. To have turned her back upon so grand an opportunity of undoing the mischief wrought by a perverse testator would have been nothing short of criminal folly. Moreover, she was quite fond enough of Horace for all practical purposes. She did not intend to take her cue from him in matters of opinion, nor, she imagined, would he be so unreasonable as to expect that from her. On the contrary, it was far more likely that his opinion would be modified and influenced by hers. But she was more than willing to make him a wedding present of her landed property, while she thought it would probably be as well to hand him over three-fourths of her personalty into the bargain. Some proportion of her income it would be advisable for her to retain, on account of Joseph and of the good folks at Harbury Vale.

The good folks at Harbury Vale wrote to congratulate her in language which bore all the impress of heartfelt sincerity. "In every respect suitable and desirable," was the comment of the Reverend John, who added that nothing would give him

greater satisfaction than to officiate at a ceremony for which no date had as yet been appointed. Mrs. Dimsdale, for her part, called Heaven to witness that what she had been hoping and praying for ever since her dear niece had first been removed from her care had now come to pass. "And it was impossible to feel any confidence about it, because I knew that you would never be swayed in the least by considerations of expediency, dear, and that nothing would induce you to marry a man whom you do not love."

If this last assertion caused Veronica to wince for a moment, it did not shake her faith in the wisdom of the course to which she was committed, and she had the comfort of being cordially approved of by Joe, for whose judgment she had more respect than she had for that of her aunt.

Joe was about to return to Lincolnshire, having reached the end of his holiday. Before leaving, he thought it incumbent upon him to say a few serious words to Veronica, although he had up to that moment fallen in with what was evidently her wish, and had treated her engagement as a mere foregone conclusion and a subject for occasional good-humoured chaff.

"Don't overdo it, you know," said he. "It's all very fine, this refusal to make a fool of yourself and this determination to behave just as before; but Trevor, you must bear in mind, is a matter-of-fact sort of chap, and if you go on impressing upon him at every turn that you have only a lukewarm sort of affection for him, who knows whether he may not end by believing you?"

"But he does believe me!" Veronica declared. "Not, of course, that my affection for him is lukewarm, which it isn't, but that it is not the kind of affection which would ever lead me to make a fool of myself. That is perfectly understood between us, and we are quite satisfied that it should be so."

"So you are pleased to say; but you see, my dear Veronica, I have had the advantage, which Trevor hasn't had, of knowing you from your youth up, and you can't deceive me. I suppose it is just possible that you may be deceiving yourself; but the real truth is that if Trevor were to throw you over now, you would be inconsolable. Consequently, as I said before, I wouldn't overdo it if I were you."

Veronica was much amused by this solemn warning; yet subsequent self-examination revealed to her the fact that it would go a deal against the grain

with her to surrender Horace to somebody else—to Dolly Cradock, for instance—and this was really quite a pleasant discovery. It did not, indeed, show that she was in love; but it seemed to show that she was by no means so indifferent to her privileges as she had fancied herself.

In truth, Horace was so scrupulous in refraining from any assertion of his own privileges, so amenable, so willing to accept whatever position she might be pleased to assign to him, that common gratitude compelled her to favour him with a larger share of her company than she might have granted had he been less diffident. Their conversations were scarcely those of lovers, but their conduct appeared to lookers-on to be all that is customary in the case of two persons so situated, and they were very happy together, discussing plans for the future, and arranging how Horace was to get himself placed on the Commission of the Peace as soon as possible and create other occupations for himself, since he had no ambition to enter Parliament. By tacit mutual consent Dolly Cradock's name was not introduced into these colloquies; but one morning the post brought Veronica a communication from that young lady, who had by no means forgotten the invitation which

she had accepted, and who gave notice of her imminent arrival. Veronica put this missive into her pocket and went out to the stable-yard in search of Horace, who was generally to be found there after breakfast. When she joined him he was anxiously examining the back of the dun horse, which had been slightly touched on the previous day, and it was some minutes before she could secure his undivided attention. This gave her time to reflect how different his tastes were from her own and what a much more intelligent interest her correspondent would have taken in the information which he imparted to her than she could affect. But, after all, he knew that as well as she did, and certainly he did not look in the least overjoyed when she mentioned casually, as they walked away, that Dolly Cradock was coming.

"Dolly Cradock!" he ejaculated, with a dropped jaw. "What on earth does she want here?"

"Well, I asked her, you know," answered Veronica. "Don't you remember my telling you that I had asked her?"

"Oh, yes; I think I do recollect your having said something about it; but I hoped—at least, I thought it was only a sort of vague general invitation."

"It was as precise as possible; and she means to hunt, and she expects you to mount her, too. I forget whether I told you that."

"No, you didn't tell me that. Well, she can have the bay; there isn't anything else for her. One comfort is that she does understand horses and that she can be trusted not to kill them—which is more than can be said for nine women out of ten. All the same, I rather wish she wasn't going to favour us with the light of her countenance. I suppose she has heard—eh?"

"Oh, yes; she has heard," answered Veronica, laughing a little. "It seems to me that every man, woman, and child in England has heard by this time. Anyhow, it is no fault of Aunt Julia's if a single person remains in ignorance."

"And what does she say about it?" the young man inquired, with a somewhat apprehensive glance at his betrothed.

"Nothing worth repeating," replied Veronica—for the truth was that Miss Cradock's comments had savoured of impertinence, and that she had been the least bit in the world put out by them. "What is there to be said to people who are engaged to be married? Anybody who could invent an original

remark, appropriate to the occasion, might dispose of it at a profit, I should think."

Horace did not press his question; but, after a pause, he observed meditatively, "Dolly Cradock isn't a bad sort in her way; only I can't imagine that you and she will ever hit it off together."

"Perhaps we shall not try very hard," Veronica returned; "it is rather more important just now that you should hit it off with her—and I know that you can do that. In fact, I was so certain of it a short time ago that I fully intended you to marry her and live happily ever afterwards."

Horace uttered an exclamation of reproachful protest; but he did not feel quite comfortable, nor was he at all eager to enlarge upon this particular topic. Sundry episodes recurred to his memory—episodes which he had cheerfully dismissed to the limbo of forgotten and more or less deplorable things, just as a penitent who has been absolved by his father-confessor ceases to vex himself over whitewashed peccadilloes. But, now that Horace came to think of it, it did not seem so certain that he had received absolution. He might even be made to ask for it, which would be most unpleasant. Why, he wondered, had he been such an infernal ass?—and to this query

echo only returned the usual unmeaning and uncivil response.

However, he really might have known Dolly Cradock better than to fear that she would put forward claims which could not be upheld for a moment. As he himself had said, she was "not a bad sort," and his esteem for her was much enhanced by her demeanour towards him when she arrived. For she shook him cordially by the hand, gave him joy, and appeared to have retained no inopportune reminiscences of riverside scenes or moonlit gardens. She only indulged in one remark of which the taste struck him as a little doubtful.

"You are prepared for a few days with the hounds and me while your liberty lasts, I hope," said she, standing in the hall, where a group of Mrs. Mansfield's guests had formed itself round her. "What are you going to do about hunting after you have entered the estate of holy matrimony? Will Veronica make you drop it, or will she insist upon trying to follow you? It has generally to be the one thing or the other in cases of this kind, I notice."

Veronica hastened to reply that it was going to be neither the one thing nor the other in her case; and

then, as it was time to dress for dinner, Miss Cradock was conducted upstairs to her bedroom.

A few of the neighbours had been bidden to dinner that evening, and a good many more had been invited to join an informal dance at a later hour. Mrs. Mansfield had opined that something ought to be done in the way of mild festivity; so this entertainment had been decided upon, Veronica assenting —as, indeed, she was always ready to assent to any such proposition of her aunt's—although dancing did not happen to be a form of relaxation which had any charms for her personally. Of late years, dancing has been going rapidly out of fashion, and good dancers, as some of us who are no longer young used to know to our sorrow, were never at any time too plentiful in this favoured land. Still, there have always been a few here and there, and of this select band Dolly Cradock was a survivor. As for Horace, he could get along well enough when he had a capable, resolute partner and plenty of space; so that he quite distinguished himself on the occasion of Miss Dimsdale's first effort at county hospitality. If it was not with his arm round Miss Dimsdale's waist that he earned this well-merited distinction, he was in no way to blame for that.

Veronica walked through two sets of Lancers and spent the rest of the evening in conversation, as did the majority of those whom she was exerting herself to entertain. Why, she reasonably asked, should one make one's self and everybody else uncomfortable by attempting feats which one is powerless to perform?

Why indeed! That was just what Dolly Cradock happened to be thinking at the time, and she did not acquit her hostess of having erred prodigiously in the above-named respect, notwithstanding Veronica's abstention from performances in which she herself excelled. Dolly flattered herself that she was no mean judge of men, and she foresaw that nothing save the most extreme discomfort could come to her poor friend Horace Trevor from the alliance which it had pleased other people to arrange for him.

But she was kind enough not to tell him so. She had sat next to him at dinner, and her behaviour had been of a nature to reassure him completely. Dolly may or may not have been a good judge of men; but it is certain that Horace was a very poor judge of women, or he never would have jumped to the conclusion that his perfidy had been so readily

condoned. As it was, he laughed inwardly at his vanished apprehensions, saying to himself that of course there had been no serious meaning in what had taken place some months before, and that Dolly had probably never given the subject a second thought. He therefore felt free to dance with her as often as she pleased—which was the whole evening through.

"This is what I call thoroughly jolly!" he remarked, during an interval of violent exercise. "An empty room, a first-rate floor, music not so bad, and the very best partner I have ever had in my life—I don't know what more one could want."

"Poor little man!" said Dolly compassionately; "it doesn't take a great deal to make him happy, does it? Not that I shouldn't be fairly well contented myself if this place belonged to me—or was going to belong to me. I suppose, by the way, that it *is* going to belong to you?"

"Oh, well, it is going to be my home, anyhow," answered Horace hesitatingly.

"H'm!—the dogs and cats of the establishment might say as much as that. One can't expect to get everything in this world, though, and I dare say you will be kindly treated so long as you behave your-

self. You are a good deal better off, at all events, than some unfortunate fellows who have had to marry for money and who have been driven to espouse shrewish old vixens."

"But I'm not marrying for money," Horace felt constrained to return; "I would have married Veronica—that is, if she would have had me and if I could have afforded it—under any circumstances."

"Honour bright?" asked Dolly, raising her eyebrows slightly.

He nodded, and was rather pleased with himself for having had the courage to be so explicit; although, as a matter of fact, it would have been both wiser and more considerate on his part to let his neighbour's insinuations pass unheeded.

"That is capital!" she returned, with much cheerfulness. "Now it only remains to drink your health in the best liquor obtainable upon the premises. Take me into the supper-room and I'll do it."

It was in the supper-room that Mrs. Mansfield's attention was drawn to what she could not but regard as the manœuvres of a young lady who had not been invited to Broxham by any wish of hers. She was not best pleased with what she saw, and later in the evening she frankly said as much to Veronica.

"I can't conceive," she remarked, with some impatience, "why you should have wanted to have that girl here; I don't like her ways of going on at all. She was drinking champagne out of tumblers after all the people had gone away, and I should not be surprised to hear that she was in the smoking-room with the men now."

Veronica replied that she had seen Miss Cradock, who at the time presented every appearance of being perfectly sober, into her bedroom; and then, as Mrs. Mansfield still looked dissatisfied, she inquired smilingly, "Are you afraid of her eloping with Horace?"

That—or something like that—was precisely what Mrs. Mansfield was afraid of; but of course it would not have done to say so. Therefore, she merely shrugged her shoulders and observed: "Well, I hope you have not asked her to stay more than a week, at the outside. For poor Lady Louisa's sake, I have always tried to be kind to her; but really there is never any knowing what she will do next, and I can't say that I think her a desirable guest."

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. MOSTYN GETS HIS FEET WET IN VAIN.

Dolly Cradock, despite the not unmerited character which she enjoyed for being a gay and wild young woman, had a head upon her shoulders quite as well furnished with brains as the majority of heads, and the last thing but one that she would ever have thought of doing would have been to elope with a man who had only five hundred a year, or thereabouts, to live upon. Consequently, Horace was in no immediate danger of being spirited away from Broxham and honourable engagements by her. At the same time, she did not relish the sensation of being jilted, nor did she appreciate the honesty with which one who had practically avowed himself her lover the other day now coolly informed her that he was the lover of his destined bride. It did not even seem to her to be proved that the assertion

was honest, while she was perfectly certain that it had no business to be. Horace Trevor in love with a blue-stocking who did not care for sport in any form, and who knew nothing of the set to which he had always belonged, nor of its ways!—the thing was preposterous upon the face of it. If he was not a rather impudent sort of liar, he must be a portentous fool, and in either case self-respect seemed to render an aggressive line of policy excusable.

Aggressive measures, however, were not assumed by Miss Dolly with any ill-humour, open or latent. All she did at the outset was to take rather more pains than usual to be agreeable to everybody, while exhibiting in a strong light the accomplishments which she possessed and which Veronica did not. And for this purpose the scene and circumstances were highly propitious. If Dolly Cradock shone anywhere it was in a country house, and her value in that capacity had always been recognised by anxious hostesses, many of whom are apt to be hard put to it to find entertainment for the friends who honour them with their company. Mrs. Mansfield, to be sure, did not recognise Dolly's value at all, but that did not prevent Mrs. Mansfield's guests

from finding her great fun, nor could it be denied that she was wonderfully successful in enlivening a party which might have been a trifle dull without her. Some people are not amused by comic songs or daring recitations (Veronica, for her misfortune, was one of them); still, the fact remains that most people are, and Miss Cradock was an adept in that particular branch of art. Moreover, she could ride any horse that you liked to put her up on, and she could shoot with almost unfailing precision. The latter acquirement might be called unfeminine if anything were unfeminine in these days; but nothing is, and Dolly, to use her own graceful expression, could "wipe the eye" of Horace's most self-satisfied young companions.

"I do not know," Mrs. Mansfield said to her niece with quiet exasperation, "whether Horace proposes to buy a double-barrelled gun for you; but you seem to be anxious that he should be attended by one of your own sex when he goes out shooting; and, perhaps, all things considered, two would be better than one."

"The pheasants would think so, no doubt, if I were the second lady," answered Veronica, laughing; "but I am sure Horace wouldn't, and I am

even more than sure that I shouldn't. What would happen to me and to those around me if I were entrusted with firearms, I shudder to imagine! Now, Dolly, I believe, is a perfectly safe neighbour in or out of covert."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" said Mrs. Mansfield. "I must confess that I should not feel quite so confident about that in your place; but I suppose I had better not interfere."

"I don't see how you can," returned Veronica serenely. "You can hardly forbid Dolly to shoot, and you will certainly never persuade me to endanger the lives of unoffending fellow-creatures in that way."

Even if she had been a little jealous of Dolly, she would have been far too proud to adopt the precautions at which her aunt hinted; but why should she be jealous? Jealousy implies the existence of sentiments from which she was happily exempt. Horace was perfectly welcome to select the associates whom he preferred, and it would have been a very bad beginning to grudge him the liberty which she had every intention of claiming for herself. For all that, she could not help being conscious of the inferiority which it was Dolly's

amiable object to render obvious to her and others. Inferiority is, after all, a relative term—as most terms must needs be in a world of compromise—and who is to say whether a learned personage who cannot handle a gun ought to rank above or below an unlettered crack shot? The standard must be fixed by common consent? Perhaps so; but the verdict of the majority will not convince the minority, and sometimes the important matter is to have the minority—be it but a minority of one—on your side. Every now and then Veronica was forced to admit to herself, with some misgivings, that the future lord of Broxham had chosen a wife perilously unlike himself in all her habits and predilections.

Miss Cradock made no secret of the fact that such was her personal opinion.

"What I can't in any way account for," she frankly told Veronica, "is your having consented to run in double harness with Horace Trevor. One understands his wanting to marry you. Without flattery—and I am not much of a hand at flattering anybody—there is nothing so very astonishing in that. But why, when you might have remained your own mistress and taken your own line, you should

have deliberately yoked yourself to a man with whom, as far as I can discover, you haven't a solitary taste in common, is one of those mysteries which I should like to hear explained—if you didn't mind explaining it."

Veronica said she was afraid it must continue to be a mystery, and suggested that the generality of marriages are apt to be mysterious to bystanders; but in her own heart she acknowledged that the candid Dolly spoke with the voice of common-sense. Mutual love is a sufficient reply to all objections; but in the absence of mutual love, what have married people to fall back upon save community of interests? Thus it began to dawn upon her that she had committed herself to an enterprise which might not prove altogether simple in the working out.

But of those incipient doubts and hesitations she was careful to breathe never a word to Horace, whom it took some little time to discover that she was not in quite such good spirits as she had been. He himself was so entirely contented with the existing state of things, so relieved to find that Dolly cheerfully acquiesced therein and so grateful to her for her acquiescence, that it did not occur to him to trace any connection between her advent and

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Veronica's altered looks. He only thought, with a sudden twinge of compunction, that he had perhaps been rather less assiduous of late in his attentions to his betrothed, and he innocently asked whether anything of that kind was the matter.

"Because if it is," he added, "I'll chuck the shooting at once. They don't really need me now, and I'd a thousand times rather be with you. Only, you know, I didn't want to be a bore, and I thought, if you had any wish for my company, you would be sure to say so. I ain't much, but I'm better than nobody, and now that I come to think of it, it must be precious dull work for you, sitting at home all day with the dowagers."

Veronica laughed and thanked him, but said that he must not imagine himself indispensable. The dowagers, she declared, gave her no trouble at all. Besides, she really saw scarcely anything of them, being left, for the most part, to her own company, of which she had all her life been accustomed to enjoy a large measure.

"And even if I were tired of myself, I should have a treat to look forward to," she continued; "for I am glad to say that Mr. Mostyn is coming to us for a few days."

"Oh, *he's* coming, is he?" said Horace, without any enthusiasm. "Do you know, Veronica, I don't much like that chap."

"I am quite aware of it," answered Veronica, still smiling. "It is your misfortune, not your fault, that you don't, and although I am sorry for it, I won't attempt to convert you. I suppose it is scarcely possible that we should like the same people. If it comes to that, I don't know that I very much like Dolly Cradock."

Horace nodded reflectively. "I shouldn't expect you to like her," he agreed—"shouldn't very much wish it either. All the same, she suits me well enough. She is—how shall I put it?—a companionable sort of girl, you see."

"Exactly: she is companionable for those whom she suits, and so is Mr. Mostyn. When one doesn't happen to suit people, their companionship has to be dispensed with, that's all."

Horace thought this a little unkind; but he held his peace and went his way, saying to himself that all women—even Veronica—were subject to occasional fits of fractiousness, when the best plan was to leave them alone.

Mr. Mostyn, on his arrival, had no such reason to

complain of his hostess, who showed herself duly sensible of the honour conferred upon her. It was not in everybody's house that the great man cared to put himself to the inconvenience of staying, and even Mrs. Mansfield (although she would never have known that he was great unless everybody had told her so) understood that special orders must be given to make him comfortable. Accordingly, a little sitting-room was prepared for his private use, in case a fit of inspiration should suddenly attack him, copies of his latest works were placed in conspicuous positions upon the drawing-room table, and his fellow guests were implored just to glance through them, if they had not done so already.

But Cyril Mostyn was not a really conceited man, or, at least, if he knew his own value, he did not in the least expect it to be recognised by the average inmates of an English country house—and he was very well able to adapt himself to his company. Although he had never cared for field sports himself, he could talk easily and by no means ignorantly to those who did; so that he won some grudging approval even from Dolly Cradock, to whom it pleased him to address a liberal share of his conversation, notwithstanding her disrespectful bluntness.

"You are not quite such a muff as I took you for," she was kind enough to tell him. "You seem to have heard things, if you haven't seen them; and I dare say you would be different if you could."

"You may take that as an indisputable fact," answered Mr. Mostyn suavely.

"Personally," continued Dolly, "I don't see the good of being a man at all when one neither hunts nor shoots nor plays games; but, after all, I suppose there must be a good many like you."

"Not among the educated classes, I believe. Still, there are a few, and we serve a number of useful, unobtrusive purposes. May I ask whether your just disdain extends to women who neither hunt nor shoot nor play games?"

Dolly shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think it is a particularly good plan to mate them with men who are really men, if that is what you mean," she answered. "But needs must when the devil drives! Situated as he is, poor Horace Trevor had hardly any alternative, you see."

"But Miss Dimsdale—had she no alternative?"

"Ah! that's another pair of shoes. If I had been in Veronica's, I should have done what she has done willingly enough; but as she is wearing

them herself, I expect they will begin to pinch her before long. She may even have to kick them off —who knows?"

"Well, yes; she may. When is the wedding to take place?"

"In January, I believe, bar accidents. Oh, the wedding will take place right enough. I was only wondering how long they would manage to live together afterwards."

Mostyn smiled and changed the subject. He had a fastidious ear, and he was no more anxious to hear the things which he knew Dolly was going to say than he would have been to listen to the hideous discords of an itinerant musician. As, moreover, he had already obtained from her all the information that he was likely to obtain, he had no further reason for monopolising so fascinating a lady, and he soon resigned her to younger and more congenial company.

But he had a word or two to say to Veronica—a word or two which he felt he must say, as her friend and as an adviser who possessed a certain amount of influence over her. On the following afternoon, therefore, he asked her to take him for a walk round her dominions, and she was all the

more ready to comply with this request because she knew very well that she would have to explain herself to him sooner or later. For some time past there had been frosts and dry weather, under the malign influence of which the ground had been growing harder and harder, but now the wind had found its way round to the west, the sky was obscured by low, level clouds with a promise of rain in them which had not begun to fall yet, and Miss Cradock had at last gone off to see what the hunting of the neighbourhood was like, mounted on the little bay horse and escorted by the bay horse's owner. Veronica said—

"Isn't it a comfort to think that everybody is provided with amusement now—that we can do just what we like until dinner-time!"

"It would be," answered Mostyn, who was walking beside her across the softened turf of the park, "if there were any imaginable need for falling back upon negative comforts; but why deliberately create such a situation for yourself?"

"I haven't created it for myself, it has been created for me," answered Veronica quickly. And then: "Oh, I know you think I am doing a foolish thing, but just consider for a moment! Feeling as

I do about it all, shouldn't I have been infinitely more foolish to resist my obvious destiny?"

She went on to relate exactly how it had come about that her destiny had been rendered obvious to her, disguising nothing, telling what she believed to be the simple truth, and affirming that she was in no way dissatisfied therewith. The comfort to which she looked forward was, she declared, far from being negative: it was positive and it was assured.

"You think so?" returned her counsellor, with a melancholy, sceptical smile; "you really think that you will be comfortable, spending your whole life with a man whom you not only do not love—I grant you that in itself does not exclude all possibility of comfort—but to whom you will always have to suit your conversation, if you want him to understand what you mean? He is in love with you? That may be; but the emotion of which you are thinking is invariably and inevitably transient, and at the end of—shall we say two years?—you will be wishing with all your heart that you had left him to his natural affinity in the person of Miss Dolly Cradock."

"I don't think I shall; but, anyhow, the thing

couldn't have been done. For, whatever his feelings may be two years hence, he does not wish to marry Dolly now; and, unless he had wished to marry her, and had allowed himself to be over-persuaded by her (which was what I rather counted upon) he would never have accepted the property from me."

"I may be very dense," remarked Mr. Mostyn; "but I cannot see why it is essential that this property should pass into his hands. Setting one calamity against another, it strikes me that Mr. Horace Trevor's comparative poverty would be a somewhat less terrible thing than the sacrifice of your entire existence. And that, you may be sure, is what your marriage will mean. The young man is a decent enough young man; but you cannot possibly imbue him with your tastes, so that your one and only chance of happiness will be to assimilate his."

"If that is so, I must try," said Veronica unflinchingly.

"It certainly is so, and my belief in your self-sacrificing capacity is so strong that I dare say you will end by accomplishing the feat. Only I cannot at all understand the necessity for it."

Since he did not understand, in spite of its having been quite clearly explained to him, there was no

more to be said. A good deal more was, however, said in the course of a long, devious walk, and Veronica would have felt more grateful to her mentor than she did if she had only known how very much Mr. Cyril Mostyn disliked getting his feet wet. As it was, she felt rather disappointed in him and vexed with him—especially as she could not but admit that he was, to a certain extent, right. Theoretically, of course, there must be give and take between married people; but practically, the wife must give and the husband take, and in cases where the contrary system is adopted the wife is apt to entertain uncommonly little respect for her husband. The moral of which was that the future Mrs. Horace Trevor had better learn to ride forthwith.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOLLY IN HER GLORY.

HORACE TREVOR's little bay horse (for that the little bay horse belonged to Horace and not to Veronica, who had paid legacy duty in respect of his value, was now no longer disputed) was one of those animals which, without being in the least vicious, required a good deal of riding. He had, as some horses and most ponies have, an exaggerated sense of humour, and was past-master of all those well-known equine practical jokes by means of which the unwary rider can be suddenly exhibited to his friends in the most unexpected and mirth-provoking attitudes. His favourite trick (when prolonged bucking had failed) was to swerve and rear simultaneously, a manœuvre which often resulted in a satisfying success; but he had many other strings to his bow, and as soon as he had accomplished his object he would stand still,

instead of attempting to get away, cock his ears and gaze at his prostrate adversary with an air of puzzled concern, as if wondering what in the world the man could be about, while he was inwardly shaken by a silent horse-laugh. Horace, who knew his little ways—had, indeed, only too good reason to know them—would never have thought of describing him as a suitable mount for a lady; but, on the other hand, to have described him as unsuitable would have been to render Dolly's intention of riding him unalterable, so he merely warned her of what she had to expect and awaited results.

These were of a nature to fill him with genuine admiration. On the way to the meet the little bay horse played every card that he possessed, and played each one of them in vain. Whether it is easier or more difficult to stick to a side-saddle than to a cross-saddle is a question as to which opinions differ, but certain it is that not many men could have maintained their position upon that mischievous beast's back as firmly as Miss Cradock maintained hers, while fewer still would have kept their temper as she did under extreme provocation. She did not lose it even when she saw that hostilities were inevitable; she only remarked, "Well, I think this

has gone on long enough now," and settled down to a struggle out of which she came completely victorious. For some minutes she had to sit tight and use her hunting-crop and spur with considerable vigour; but, in the end, her opponent, finding that he could not get rid of her, and being at heart a good-humoured creature, shook his head, acknowledged himself beaten and bore no malice. After that, there was no further trouble with him.

"I must say for you that you *can* ride!" was Horace's flattering comment upon the issue of the battle.

"Didn't you know that before?" returned Dolly composedly.

But in truth she was not ill-pleased that he admired her, nor unconscious of being admirable. If she wanted him to draw comparisons—and, naturally enough, she did—the occasion could not have been better suited to her purpose. Was it to be expected of her that she should neglect to make the most of it? Moreover, Fortune favoured her so far that a fox was found in the first covert drawn, and gave them a capital run of an hour and twenty minutes before being killed in the open. Horace, whom she followed, was with them from start to

finish, and although she subsequently thought fit to pooh-pooh the country, as presenting no difficulties worth speaking of, it had not been everybody who had cared to ride as straight as she and her pilot had done. It is true that her mount was both quick and clever, and that he seldom (unless he was interfered with) indulged in eccentricities while hounds were running; still, he bore an unenviable reputation, and his rider was made the recipient of many well-deserved compliments.

The Master, a rather crabbed old fellow, who, as a rule, hated women in the hunting-field, addressed her with what for him was quite unwonted civility, after instructing the huntsman to give her the brush.

"Very glad to have met you at last, Miss Dimsdale," said he. "Hope we shall often see you out with us now. You're evidently accustomed to something better in the way of sport than we can show you in this shooting county; still, we do our best—we do our best."

And then he looked as if some acknowledgment of the very fair sport they had already enjoyed would be welcome and appropriate. But Miss Cradock was nothing if not sincere.

"Oh, I knew it couldn't be up to much," she answered coolly. "But I have seen worse, and I am rather agreeably disappointed so far. I am not Miss Dimsdale, by-the-way—no such luck!"

"Oh!—beg your pardon, I'm sure!" returned the old gentleman, rather taken aback; and perhaps for a moment he was not sorry that this very self-possessed young woman was not the permanent neighbour for whom he had taken her. But he speedily recovered his good-humour, and after Horace had introduced him to Dolly by her proper name, he remarked with a gruff laugh: "I wouldn't for the world breathe a disparaging word about the bride-elect, Trevor; but, upon my life! now that I have seen Miss Cradock go as she has gone to-day I feel more than half inclined to echo her words when she told me that she wasn't the lady in question, and say, 'No such luck!'"

If this was not precisely a happy speech, he thought it was, and he rode off, chuckling contentedly, while Dolly shot a demure, amused glance at Horace, who looked the other way. Personally, he did not in the least wish Veronica to hunt, being well aware that she had qualities which more than atoned for certain deficiencies; yet no doubt many

people would think it a pity that she did not, and he experienced a sort of annoyed, vicarious shame on her behalf when he had to explain to various farmers and others who had fallen into the same mistake as the M.F.H. had done, that his future wife was not a sportswoman.

Well, if she had been the keenest sportswoman that ever sat in a saddle, she would have had few opportunities of gratifying her tastes in a neighbourhood where vulpecide was openly and shamelessly practised. This, at least—or something equivalent to it—was what Horace, being in a quarrelsome mood, saw fit to affirm before the afternoon was over. For two coverts had been drawn blank, although the hounds had been taken thither by invitation, and the light was beginning to fail, and whether it was worth while to persevere under such dispiriting conditions seemed to be quite an open question. Dolly, when it was put to her, answered at once in the negative.

"How many miles home?" she asked. "Eight or nine, I suppose? Then let's be off. We shall do no more good to-day, and you look so sulky that the only treatment for you is to take you home and put you in the corner."

Horace signified his entire willingness to be taken home, and apologised for looking sulky; but she laughed and declared that he must be forgiven. "One has one's little reasons for sulking every now and then, and I can guess what some of yours are."

"Well," said Horace, "I do think it is rather too bad for a man to write and say that he wants his coverts drawn on a particular day, and then——"

"Oh, it's a great deal too bad, and I am sure you will never do such a wicked thing when you have coverts of your own: only that doesn't happen to be the cause of your black looks, my friend. Come, be reasonable! You can't have coverts or anything else in this world without paying a certain price, and as you didn't think the price too high when you concluded your bargain it doesn't become you to murmur now. The neighbouring hawbucks won't appreciate Mrs. Trevor; but, after all, what does that matter when you yourself appreciate her so profoundly?"

Horace was not so much struck by the impertinence of this speech as astonished at Dolly's penetration in having read his thoughts. "How did

you know that I had anything of that sort in my mind?" he asked wonderingly.

"I am so awfully clever that I divined it. Well, I suppose I ought to be sorry for you; but I can't say that I am. Why should you expect to be allowed to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds?"

"I don't expect any such thing, and I certainly don't want anyone to be sorry for me," returned Horace, with unwonted acrimony. "My own humble opinion is that most fellows would envy me. What more could a man ask for than to be accepted by the girl whom he loves and who, as he very well knows, is a thousand times too good for him? I can assure you that I wouldn't change places with any man in England!"

He thought it as well to put things strongly, because Dolly really deserved no mercy after having been so impertinent as to pity him; but she merely remarked, without any apparent annoyance, "Ah! so you are pleased to assert."

"Well, it is the truth."

"Is it? But then you don't invariably stick to the truth, do you? I seem to remember your having told me something which one hopes wasn't

the truth just before you left London in such a hurry."

This was horribly unpleasant; and the worst of it was that she was absolutely within her right in saying unpleasant things. Her taste might be open to question; but that did not alter the fact that she was entitled to reproach him, nor could he deny that he had behaved badly to her. For a moment, as he splashed along by her side through miry byways and between black hedgerows, he thought of reminding her how she herself had decreed that the episode to which she alluded was to be forgotten with all possible despatch; but that seemed an ignoble plea to take shelter behind, and he preferred to say boldly—

"I'll tell you the truth now, anyhow. I was down on my luck that evening; I was pretty angry with myself, and—and other people; I felt sure that Veronica would never look at me; and so——"

"And so you thought you would make love to me, as a *pis-aller?* How flattering that would be, if it were really the truth! But what preserves me from tumbling off my horse with shame and mortification is that I don't believe a word of it."

Horace drew in his breath and gazed piteously

round the darkening horizon, as if in search of some adequate rejoinder; but neither earth nor sky nor any of the living creatures that came within his ken could help him out of his dilemma—which was, indeed, an unusual one. To convince a lady that you have always adored her, although you may not always have appeared to do so, is a task which may be approached with some reasonable degree of confidence; but to persuade her (when she is not inclined to take your word for it) that, notwithstanding your having once declared your love for her, you never entertained any sentiment of the kind, is not so much a difficult undertaking as a species of brutality which cannot even be attempted. Horace, therefore, hung his head and held his peace, while Dolly resumed composedly—

"No; I don't believe it; and, as I don't, why shouldn't I allow myself the satisfaction of saying so? You need not feel the least alarmed, though. *Je suis bonne diablesse;* I don't care to make mischief; and no indiscreet revelations of mine shall prevent you from leading your chaste Veronica to the altar. Only I should have had a rather higher opinion of you if you had not tried to humbug me."

Horace still felt himself hopelessly unequal to the

occasion; all he could do was to mutter feebly: "I ain't a humbug—never was called a humbug before in my life!"

"You are called by that name now, and if you don't like it—you can do the other thing," returned his companion pitilessly. "In justice to you I'll allow you credit for having tried to humbug yourself; but it won't do, dear boy, and I strongly suspect that you know it won't do. Take example by me, and look things straight in the face. If I had been the owner of Broxham it is as certain as anything can be that you would have asked me to marry you; and if you had been the owner of Broxham it is not at all unlikely that I should have consented to marry you. But Broxham belongs to somebody else, and the consequence is that other arrangements have to be made the best of. By all means make the best of them; I only beg of you not to pretend that your match is a love-match. Moreover, as a mere friendly suggestion, I should advise you not to turn sulky because your future wife is not all that you would like her to be."

Horace was so far provoked into forgetting his good manners as to ejaculate emphatically, "She

is everything that I should like her to be—absolutely everything! And that I am prepared to swear!"

"My dear friend, why perjure yourself? If you swore until you were black in the face, you would not alter hard facts. Personally, I like Veronica very well, a great deal better than I like most of the girls of my acquaintance—who are a baddish lot, between you and me—but when you ask me to believe that you will ever be quite comfortable or at your ease with a woman who doesn't know how to ride, you ask for a little more credulity than I have in stock just at present. If it comes to that, there is her side of the question too, you know. Most likely she will never be quite comfortable with a man who reads nothing except the sporting papers and the Racing Calendar."

Now, it so chanced that this highly plausible forecast of probabilities fell upon an ear which it had not been intended to reach quite so directly. After having accompanied Mr. Mostyn back to the house and left him to go upstairs and change his socks, Veronica had wandered forth again, partly because she was restless and partly because she wished to be alone, and so it had come to pass that, strolling

further and further in the twilight, she had arrived at the high wooden palings by which her park was encircled. Here she paused and, leaning against the trunk of a rugged elm, set to work to cross-examine herself. This, if undertaken in a conscientious spirit, is always a long business, and she was still far from having reached the end of it when the sound of horses' hoofs in the distance caused her to desist. Nearer and nearer it came, and when she was able to make sure that two horses were approaching her at a walking pace, she drew correct inferences. Her intention was to hail the returning equestrians, who must needs pass within a few yards of her, and inquire what sport they had had; but, for the reason above mentioned, her intention was not carried into effect. It was no fault of hers that Dolly Cradock's voice was clear and penetrating, nor could she help overhearing something which it was not altogether agreeable to her to overhear. Having thus unintentionally played the eavesdropper, she did not feel that the moment would be well chosen for breaking in upon an interesting discussion, so she let them ride on and slipped noiselessly away across the grass, in order that she might not catch Horace's reply.

For the rest, she could easily imagine what his reply would be, and, since she did not doubt his loyalty, there was no need to speculate upon the subject. What seemed to her to be a far more important question to consider was whether Mr. Mostyn and Dolly Cradock were not, from their respective points of view, entirely in the right. Oil and water will not mix; a sporting man and a woman imbued with literary tastes, as well as heterodox ideas respecting *feræ naturæ*, can hardly be said to have been made for one another, and perhaps, as a general thing, they ought to be warned against attempting to set up house together. But in this particular instance there were complications. The sporting man really did love the literary woman; it was so expedient as to be almost essential that he should marry her, and she herself felt it to be her clear duty to marry him, if she could by any means reconcile it with her sense of what was right to do so. Moreover—but this may have been irrelevant and illogical—she was conscious of a strong disinclination to abandon her scheme at Dolly's bidding. "It is for me that he cares, not for her," she said to herself, "and he knows quite well what I am and what I am not. He has made his choice with his eyes open."

In this way the resolution which Veronica had formed earlier in the afternoon took firmer and more definite shape—a shape so definite, indeed, that she greatly astonished her betrothed by taking him aside, after dinner, to say abruptly: "Horace, I want you to teach me to ride."

"With all the pleasure in life," he answered; "the only thing is that you will have to get a horse before you can begin."

"Couldn't I have the one that Dolly was riding to-day?"

"The bay?—oh, Lord, no! he would kill you to a certainty. There are precious few women, I can tell you, whom I should like to see upon that little brute's back."

"I suppose there are not many women who ride as well as she does; still, I am not afraid of horses, and there is no reason why I should not learn. Anything can be learnt."

"Yes—in time," answered Horace; "but one does not pick up the horse that one wants every day. However, I'll look out for you."

"That means that I may have to wait weeks or months, whereas I want to make a start at once. Couldn't I begin upon your big horse, if you won't let me have the other?"

Horace looked dubious. "The dun is quiet enough," he answered; "a child might ride him in a snaffle—that is, if the child didn't mind being run away with for a bit—and all you would have to do would be to sit upon his back. But, as far as I know, he has never carried a lady, and you can see for yourself that that isn't his mission in life. What has made you take this sudden fancy into your head, Veronica? Would you mind waiting until—until we are married and settled down? Then we could go to work systematically, you know, if you still wished it."

"I will ride the dun horse to-morrow," said Veronica decisively. "I am sure I shall come to no harm if you go with me and tell me what to do, and I should very much mind waiting. As for sudden fancies, you ought to know that they are the prerogative of my sex and that no sensible man ever dreams of asking us to account for them."

Perhaps Horace had sufficient sense to be able to account for this one; at all events, he thought it best to offer no further opposition and ask no more questions.

CHAPTER XIX.

PRIDE HAS A FALL.

It was, of course, quite out of the question for Veronica to ride the dun horse on the following day, and Horace would have been obliged to explain to her why it was out of the question, had not all need for discussion been obviated by the lucky circumstance that she did not possess a riding-habit. This gave time to profit by the assistance of a competent and good-natured lady who was always ready to mount any animal that might be offered to her, and the result of a few preliminary canters was so far satisfactory that Dolly pronounced the dun's back as safe a means of locomotion as an old woman's bath-chair, though, perhaps, scarcely as comfortable a one.

"He won't do anything," she assured Veronica. "As far as I can discover, he hasn't a trick of any

sort or kind in him, and he takes quite kindly to a side-saddle. Only he is rather a free goer, and you will find him pull you a little. However, I dare say that by the time your habit comes, I shall have got him to understand one or two things which have hardly dawned upon him yet."

Veronica had to submit to some patronizing counsels from that quarter, and to say "Thank you" for them. She was sensible enough to perceive that it could not be otherwise, although she would fain have dispensed with Dolly's help—perhaps even with Dolly's presence at Broxham altogether. But her guest said nothing about leaving, nor could the hint which Mrs. Mansfield was avowedly anxious to convey be considered for one moment permissible. Mrs. Mansfield was a good deal vexed about her niece's whim, and told her as much without circumlocution.

"It does seem so very gratuitous!" she exclaimed. "If one can't ride one can't ride, and there's an end of it. What is the use of parading one's incapacity, in addition to risking one's neck? Nothing is more stupid than showing yourself to a man in a thoroughly unbecoming light, except showing him that you are jealous; and your idea of the way to increase

Horace's admiration for you is to kill both those birds with one stone."

Veronica knew that it would be mere waste of breath to disclaim the motive ascribed to her: at the bottom of her heart, indeed, there lurked an uncomfortable suspicion that she could not have done so with absolute truth. However, she was now fully committed to a course which had been somewhat over-hastily decided upon, and she was not to be turned aside from it by a tardy realisation of the fact that everybody was pretty sure to misunderstand her and laugh at her.

Mr. Mostyn, at all events, was a more or less consolatory exception. He understood, or professed to understand, well enough what she was driving at, and he did not laugh at her, although his valedictory remarks were neither encouraging nor meant to be so.

"Do you know why the sublime is said to be next door neighbour to the ridiculous?" the poet asked her on the morning of his departure. "It is only because the consequences of sublime actions are so often and so patently inadequate. I told you, the other day, that you might very likely succeed in the attempt which you are bent upon; but what a price

you are going to pay!—and what a poor little success it will be at best! At the risk of making you angry, I must confess to a hope that, after all, you will not succeed, and that these heroic efforts to stifle yourself may give you a choking sensation which you will find unendurable. I shall continue to cherish that hope until I hear that you are actually married. It will be time enough then to sing a requiem over my defunct poetess."

Now there is really nothing in the least incompatible between poetry and horse exercise; but the truth was that it did require a rather bold flight of imagination to picture Horace Trevor as the admiring husband of a poetess, and although Veronica had never dreamt of laying claim to the latter designation, there were occasional moments when she felt that the atmosphere of Broxham—supposing it to remain unchanged—might become somewhat difficult to breathe. But would it remain unchanged? That was the question to which she was less prepared to return a decisive answer than she would have been a short time before. For it was beginning to dawn upon her that docile though Horace was, he would perforce continue to like people and pursuits separated from her by an impassable gulf. Meanwhile,

she proposed to make a bold leap at the gulf, and every day her hopes of clearing it grew fainter. Had Aunt Julia, after all, been so very far wrong in cautioning her against unnecessary humiliation? The cobbler is in no way ridiculous so long as he sticks to his last, but as soon as he takes it into his head to play at being an athlete, hilarity on the part of bystanders becomes excusable, and it struck Veronica that in her case hilarity was taking time by the forelock. In that respect, however, she wronged her friends, who were only a little curious to see what would happen to her, and were not ill-naturedly amused at her courage and obstinacy. It was no fault of theirs that, knowing a good deal more about horses than she did, they foresaw what was probably in store for her.

"If I were you," said Dolly to Horace, in the course of one of those prolonged confidential colloquies which Veronica watched with mixed feelings, "I should take a leading-rein. She won't know that it isn't the usual thing unless you tell her, and I don't for one moment believe that she will be able to hold that horse."

"All very fine," grumbled Horace; "but you know what the bay is. He would begin to play the ass at

once when he saw what was up, and that would start the other. I wish to goodness Veronica would consent to wait until I get a proper mount for her!"

Horace and Dolly were once more upon terms of comfortable amity. He had made no further effort to persuade her that he was really in love with his future bride and had never been in love with anybody else, nor had she distressed him by referring again to an episode which he was anxious to bury in oblivion. As she herself had said, she was *bonne diablesse*, while he, on his side, was ever ready to ignore the disquieting elements in a given situation.

The rapidity with which orders can be executed when money is no object is quite extraordinary, and Veronica's habit arrived before the education of the dun horse had been well taken in hand. She was so set upon carrying out her purpose forthwith that Horace's pleas for a little longer delay were not even listened to; only an hour or two before embarking upon an adventure of which it was impossible to predict the consequences, she suddenly bethought herself of the advisability of making her will. This, with the aid of the instructions contained in "Whitaker's Almanack," she accomplished to her

own satisfaction, leaving the whole of her landed property and the half of her personalty to Horace, while the remaining moiety, subject to sundry trifling legacies, was to be divided between the Rev. John Dimsdale and his son Joseph. Then she got the butler and the footman to witness her signature, arrayed herself in a garb to which she was not accustomed and which felt rather queer, and descended the staircase, calmly prepared to encounter Fate.

It was not altogether pleasant to find that all the people who were staying in the house had congregated together under the porch to see her start; but she betrayed no annoyance and only offered up a brief inward prayer that she might be placed in the saddle without any unseemly scramble. Horace, as it happened, was at the same moment silently breathing the selfsame aspiration, and perhaps the fervour of his desire lent additional strength to his muscles; for he successfully achieved a feat towards the performance of which he received no help from his unskilled burden. The horse stood like a rock, manifesting no impatience while Veronica was being shown how to hold her reins; and presently the pair got away, walking quietly down the drive, to the satisfaction, it may be hoped, of onlookers, who

had possibly expected to witness something a little more exciting.

"That's all right," said Horace, with a sigh of relief. "Now we won't go off the road until we are well out of sight."

"Are we going off the road?" asked Veronica, thinking to herself what a very large and powerful animal a horse was and how exceedingly difficult it must be to manage him.

"Not unless you like; only, perhaps, it would be as well just to take the bounce out of them. You see, these horses aren't much accustomed to hacking, and they'll go quieter after they have had a bit of a gallop. I thought we might take them across the common: you can't very well come to grief there. You don't feel nervous, do you?"

"I don't think so," answered Veronica truthfully. "I feel rather funny, but I am not frightened that I know of. Shall I be run away with?"

"Yes, very likely; but don't lose your head and don't pull him. He's a knowing old bird, and he'll take very good care not to hurt himself."

Veronica trusted that he would take equally good care not to hurt her; but this, she presumed, must depend upon whether she could maintain her posi-

tion on his back, which at present seemed a somewhat dubious proviso. Meanwhile, he walked soberly along, taking no notice of the capering bay, while Horace, scrutinising her anxiously, explained that she was holding her hands all wrong and sitting in the wrong place. After a time she wearied of these minute instructions, of being told what she ought to do in every conceivable emergency, and of the many bad accidents which had occurred in the presence of her instructor as a consequence of careless riding.

"If you go on much longer in this way," she said, laughing, "you will make me believe that nobody except a thoroughly experienced rider should ever mount a horse. Yet I suppose there must have been a beginning even to your knowledge and Dolly Cradock's."

"Oh, well, I began on a pony when I was a youngster," answered Horace, "and so, I should think, did she. Besides, she is as hard as nails; it doesn't hurt her to tumble about." He added, after a pause: "The great thing is to have confidence."

"And I can't be accused of lacking that," observed Veronica, "or I shouldn't be here. Are you wishing that I were anywhere else?"

As a matter of fact he was, but he feared to offend her by confessing it. He answered very diplomatically: "You know well enough, Veronica, that I always wish to have you with me."

"Even when you are pursuing the fox? I hope you understand that that is what I am trying to qualify myself for."

Horace did not look precisely enchanted. "If you can learn to ride you can soon learn to hunt," he answered hesitatingly. "But why should you? You don't like it, and what is the use of doing things that one doesn't like?"

Alas! there is very little use in attempting to do them; and if everybody realised that simple elementary fact, this world would not be nearly as full of failures and disappointments as it is. But Veronica was not in the mood for philosophic reflection. She said rather doggedly: "I have quite made up my mind that your wife must be a hunting woman."

"Yes, I thought that was what you were driving at," observed Horace, in a vexed tone, "and it's the greatest mistake that ever was! I don't say that I shouldn't be glad if you were fond of sport; but when I know that you aren't, and never will be——"

A discussion which was opening somewhat ominously was here cut short by the abrupt and involuntary withdrawal of one of the parties to it. Horace had unthinkingly turned off the road on to the edge of the long and wide common whither they were bound, and the moment that the dun horse felt turf under his feet away he went, with a keen enjoyment of the rushing, moist wind, with a strong desire to stretch his legs and without the slightest consideration for the wishes of his temporary mistress, whom he had long ere this discovered to be a factor of no importance in the afternoon's amusement. The little bay flung up his heels and squealed, but was not permitted to follow in the wake of his stable companion. Horace, knowing that he could do no good and that the horse was not likely to do any harm, was satisfied to keep the fugitives well in sight, and was properly ashamed of himself for being shaken with irrepressible laughter at the way in which the one was playing cup-and-ball with the other. As he had anticipated, the old horse ran in a wide circle, slackening his pace as soon as he had had enough of it; Veronica lost her breath but not her seat, and by the time that Horace was able to rejoin her, no

trace of a smile was discernible upon his concerned countenance.

"Why didn't you stop him?" she gasped rather reproachfully.

"Well, it wouldn't have been quite the easiest thing in the world to do. Besides, it wasn't necessary; you rode with great judgment."

"Please don't insult me," said Veronica.

"But you did really! If you had tugged at his mouth, he might have given you some trouble; but you had the good sense to leave him alone, and he'll be all right now, unless—that is, I'm sure he will be all right now. I am afraid that he must have shaken you a great deal, though."

"He has shaken me until I feel like a whipped-up egg," answered Veronica, laughing rather disconsolately; "still, here I am, which is a very wonderful thing to me. Do they always throw people about like that when they gallop?"

Horace was going to say, "That depends upon the people," but thought it better to substitute, "That depends upon the horse. I knew you would find his paces rather rough at first; but one soon gets accustomed to that."

Veronica could not imagine it possible that she

would ever become accustomed to so violent a mode of progression; yet, as a matter of fact, she did feel a good deal more at home after the second, and much quieter, gallop upon which Horace insisted; for the dun horse was really a good-natured beast, besides being at heart a somewhat lazy one. Therefore, since he was in company, and since he had asserted his supremacy, he was graciously pleased to accommodate his pace to that of the bay. Then came a brief trot along a stretch of sandy road, which was so dreadfully uncomfortable that Horace's pupil begged to be allowed to postpone that branch of her instruction to the next lesson, and they dropped back into an easy walk. However, she was not ill pleased with her performance, so far—considerably better pleased, if the truth must be told, than he was. Never in his life had he met with anyone so absolutely ignorant of the art of equitation, and she quite took his breath away when, after they had turned their horses' heads homewards, she coolly remarked—

"Oh, by-the-way, there is one thing more that I want to do—I want to jump a fence of some sort."

At first he would not hear of her attempting what there was so very little reason to suppose that she

could accomplish; but when she grew peremptory he yielded, fearing to affront her, and saying to himself that, after all, it is a simple enough thing to sit upon a horse's back. So he selected a low bank, with a narrow ditch on the hither side of it, and, having told her exactly what to do, put the bay at what, in his estimation, was an extremely modest obstacle.

It certainly appeared to be so; and Veronica, watching him as he popped over it, thought that the process looked perfectly easy and rather nice—only she had not quite taken in his meaning when he had warned her that the dun horse jumped big. That wise and well-meaning animal, realising what was required of him, cocked his ears and followed his leader at his own pace, which was a rather quick one. Then, all of a sudden, and long before he had been expected to do so, he hurled himself up into the air. Veronica was conscious of a most extraordinary and sickening sensation—of a tremendous jolt. And after that, the next thing she knew was that somebody had had a fall. She was not quite sure that it was herself until earth and sky had ceased whirling madly around her; but when she did recover her senses she became aware

of a fact even more disconcerting than that she had been pitched over her horse's head—namely, that she was in the presence of a group, composed of Dolly Cradock, Horace and two other young men, all of whom were gazing at her with countenances of almost unnatural gravity.

"Please laugh, if you want to laugh," were the first words that she uttered. "I should roar with laughter myself if this had happened to one of you." And she could not help adding inwardly, "Oh, how I wish it had!"

But the good manners of the company proved equal to the demand made upon them, and nobody so much as indulged in a smile. One of the young men hastened to assure her that their having witnessed her discomfiture was a pure accident—they had gone out for a walk, because there was nothing else to do, and had had no idea of meeting her and Trevor. Horace was full of solicitude and unwilling to believe that she had not hurt herself at all; while Dolly rated him roundly for his stupidity.

"It was all your fault," she declared. "What did you want to go larking over hedges and ditches for? If Veronica had broken her neck you would have deserved to be put on your trial for murder.

One would think you were a tailor out for a bank holiday!"

That was all very well, and Horace's omission to plead the justification for his conduct which he might have pleaded was a thing to be as grateful for as one could manage to be; but the humiliation was none the less complete. Veronica was, indeed, able to insist upon being placed in the saddle again, but she had to submit to be led home, the truth being that she had had more of a shake than she cared to admit. Dolly and her friends very considerately continued their walk, and little conversation took place between the affianced pair until the house was reached—for Horace's anxious inquiries and reiterated apologies were scarcely answered. But when Veronica was lifted to the ground she said rather forlornly—

"I am afraid it won't do, Horace; I am afraid it will never do."

"Well," said he diffidently, yet with an air of subdued relief which did not escape her, "I am almost afraid it won't, dear. Of course, you might try again with another class of horse, but——"

"Oh! I shall not try again," she answered, as she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XX.

VERONICA CHANGES HER MIND.

It is one of the interesting peculiarities of our mortal nature that we are all of us apt to be dreadfully ashamed of things which reflect no real discredit upon us, while we can sit down comfortably enough under accusations which ought to make us very angry indeed. Veronica Dimsdale, who had no sins worth speaking of to reproach herself with, would have accepted with philosophy and indifference any charges which it might have pleased Aunt Julia's and Horace's friends to bring against her moral character; but she found it a hard matter to forgive them for having seen her absurdly thrown from the back of a horse who had only done what she had asked him to do.

Yet they were very kind and lenient with her. They scarcely alluded to her mishap that evening.

nor were they unfeeling enough to make any inquiries after her aching head and limbs. Mrs. Mansfield, to be sure, remarked : "Well, my dear, all I can say is I hope this will be a lesson to you!" but everybody else seemed to understand how crestfallen she must be, and that it was a case of least said soonest mended. Perhaps this very forbearance on their part vexed her almost more than open, good-humoured ridicule would have done—so impossible is it to give satisfaction, even to the best of women, when she has quarrelled with herself!

But was there any occasion or excuse for quarrelling with Horace? Not, of course, for quarrelling with him, Veronica thought; but for breaking with him there might be, and she was more than half inclined to believe that there were, sufficient reasons. The words of wisdom spoken by the experienced Mostyn had germinated in her mind and were beginning to bear fruit; the equally wise observations of Dolly Cradock, which she had involuntarily overheard, could not but have some weight with her; she perceived, not only that she would never be able to participate in Horace's pursuits, but that he did not at all wish her to do so, and she asked herself

whether it was too late even now to abandon an impracticable scheme.

One thing which made her feel that it was impracticable, and that he might very possibly agree with her in deeming it so, was his uneasy, half-apologetic demeanour in her presence and the evident alacrity with which he quitted her side to join Dolly Cradock and the other young people. This, had she but known it, was neither more nor less than the reflection of her own manner, which was constrained, and of which he did not know what to make. He was aware that he had, somehow or other, offended her, but, having a clear conscience in the matter, and fearing lest he should put his foot into it more deeply by questioning her, he fell back upon the system—not a bad system in itself—which he had always adopted in his dealings with an incomprehensible sex and left her to come round at her leisure.

Thus for three days a breach which could hardly be called a breach at the outset went on widening at a pace much more perceptible to one of those between whom it yawned than to the other. Veronica still felt sure of Horace's good faith, but she felt a good deal less sure than she had done that he was not deceiving himself. What was so obvious

as to be beyond dispute was that he was awkward and silent with her, whereas he was merry and talkative with Dolly, of whose society he never appeared to weary. Moreover, setting him and his wishes aside, did it not behove her to consider herself a little? "If I could have hunted with him and managed to like the people whom he likes, I might have played my part fairly well," she thought; "but I doubt whether I have it in me to 'stifle myself,' as Mr. Mostyn says: I am too angular to fit into this sort of life, and perhaps it is almost as silly of me to attempt it as to try riding a horse over a bank."

Well, at any rate, Dolly was not destined to outshine her in the latter respect just then; for now a hard frost set in, with low, black clouds sailing up from the north-east, which presently broke over Broxham in those small feathery flakes hated by all men in this temperate clime. Russian and Canadian winters have their good points and bring their amusements with them; but snow in England is an accursed thing, coming upon us unawares, depriving us of all forms of outdoor exercise and too often rendering us snappish with our fellow-sufferers. Veronica was not exactly snappish; but

she retired to the library and read all day long by herself, while disconsolate sportsmen sat in the smoking-room and used language unfit for the ears of refined persons.

However, there was one person in the house who was not so refined but that she could endure to listen to a few profane words, uttered under so great provocation. What she could by no means endure was to be deprived of male companionship; so she assembled them all in the billiard-room, where they played pool during an entire afternoon, and where, to judge by the shouts of laughter which were audible from time to time even in the remote quietude of the library, she was successful in raising their spirits. Veronica paused in her reading every now and then to listen to them, and thought to herself, "How infinitely better it would have been if that horse had broken my neck for me! Then, about a year hence, Dolly would be here as mistress of the establishment, and all manner of troublesome complications would be averted."

Not having had her neck broken, it only remained for her to make the best of troublesome complications, and the more she thought about it all, the less sanguine did she feel of receiving any help from

those for whose sake she had almost decided to cancel existing arrangements. As for Aunt Julia and others less directly interested, they would of course make her life a burden to her, but she would have to bear that. They certainly would not be sorry for her, so she felt at liberty to bestow a good deal of pity upon herself, while she sat gazing at the blurred, dreary landscape, and listening to those irritating periodical outbursts of hilarity which reached her from the distant billiard-room.

In the meantime, she had not been so completely forgotten as it suited her mood to assume. Horace, who had been enjoying himself pretty well, but who could not help thinking that she must find it a little bit slow to be left all alone for so many hours together, would have been only too delighted if she had seen fit to join the pool-players; but as she did not do so, and as he supposed that that sort of thing was not very likely to amuse her, he took advantage at length of having been knocked out of the game to slip quietly away and see whether he could be of any use.

"Shall I disturb you if I come in?" he asked humbly, after opening the library door and inserting his head through the aperture.

"Not in the least," answered Veronica. "On the contrary, you are the very person whom I was wishing to see; and it is getting too dark to read."

"Well, I'm glad you were wishing to see me," said Horace cheerfully, as he advanced and drew up a chair beside hers. "I wasn't sure that you would be, though I needn't tell you that I have been wishing to see you all the afternoon."

"Really? I should have thought, by the noise you have been making, that you were tolerably satisfied with what you had got."

"Have they been kicking up an awful shindy?" asked Horace. "It wasn't me—it was the other fellows and Dolly Cradock. You can't keep them from bear-fighting when a lot of them get together like that. And I must say that Dolly is rare sport," he added, with a retrospective snigger.

"I have no doubt of it," answered Veronica dryly; "she is as much in her element here as I am out of mine. Nobody, I am sure, will ever accuse me of being rare sport."

"Oh, of course you're different," assented Horace.

"Altogether different, and, unfortunately, I always shall be. I have realised that now, and I ought to have realised it sooner."

"But, good gracious! you don't want to be like her, do you?" asked Horace.

"No, I can't honestly say that I do; but I wish, for your sake, that I were more like her in some respects. However, since that is impossible, we won't talk about it. Horace, I am going to say something which I am afraid will distress you at first; but try to hear me out patiently, and try to believe that it is distressing to me, too, to be obliged to say it. I have been thinking things over during the last few days, and I have come to the conclusion that I did very wrong to accept you. It isn't your fault, and perhaps it isn't so very much mine that we are hopelessly ill-suited to one another; still, there is the fact, which is obvious to everybody, and we had much better recognise it at once than wait until there is no remedy. Now, what I want you to understand is this——"

"I understand," interrupted Horace, "that you want to throw me over. That is enough, and more than enough. What have I done, Veronica?"

"Nothing that I have the slightest right to complain of or that you have any cause to reproach yourself with. It is I who have done things—or rather left them undone. I should always leave

them undone if I were to marry you, and you would always have to keep on making allowances for me—which would be frankly intolerable! I know this ought to have been said before, and I know I am treating you badly, in a certain sense. All I can say is that I should be treating you much worse if I allowed our engagement to go on. Don't try to persuade me that it is not so; if you do, you will only force me to say that I must break the engagement off on my own account."

"If that is the truth I think it ought to be said," returned Horace, looking very grave and unhappy. "You can't expect me to thank you for jilting me or to agree with you that you are doing it for my good."

"I suppose not. Very well, then; let it be taken for granted that I have changed my mind. Only you must not think that I care less for you than I did when I thought that I could be your wife."

"You told me at the time that you did not love me," remarked Horace disconsolately.

"Exactly so, and that is just why I cannot marry you. I still think that it need not have been an insuperable objection, if we had had anything at all in common, just as our having nothing in common

would not have mattered, if we had been really in love with one another; but as things are——"

"At least you can't doubt that I really love you, Veronica!" broke in Horace. "I always hoped that you would come to love me, too, in time. It didn't seem so utterly impossible."

"I am sure you mean what you say," answered Veronica; "but people don't always know their own minds—am I not a proof of it? We won't talk of what might have been, though; the future, not the past, is what we have to consider, and you can still make my future comparatively smooth for me, if you choose."

"Of course I should choose to do that, if I could," answered Horace rather coldly; "but as my future is to have nothing to do with yours, I don't quite see how I can."

"Well, I will tell you. Before I went out riding with you the other day, it suddenly occurred to me that I was running some risk of coming to an untimely end, and that it would be a most unfortunate thing if I were to die intestate. So I made my will, and, naturally, I left this place to you."

"Under the circumstances, that was a natural

thing to do, no doubt," answered Horace, since she seemed to expect that he should say something.

"It would have been natural under any circumstances. You know what my feeling is about Broxham. It ought not to belong to me; I have never regarded it as really belonging to me, and even if I had, I should take the first opportunity of getting rid of it; for I don't like the place, and don't mean to live here. Now do you understand how you may make my path easy for me and help me to face the fury of Aunt Julia?"

"Can't say I do."

"Oh, I think you do, Horace! You would rather not accept a gift from me? Well, I wouldn't ask you to accept it, if it were really a gift; but it is nothing of the sort, it is merely an act of restitution. Don't let us argue about it—we both of us know so well all that there is to be urged for and against the arrangement!—let us simply agree that the thing is to be done and never say another word about the matter. Then perhaps we may be friends again—which is what I most long for."

"I am afraid you will have to long in vain, Veronica," returned Horace, rather grimly. "I can't prevent you from throwing me over, and, after

what you have said, I mustn't try, but I am not going to pretend that I feel particularly friendly towards you. As for taking your property off your hands, you need not have the slightest fear of my arguing such a preposterous question as that. If you are bent upon getting rid of it, I dare say you may find some accommodating person without advertising for him, only I can assure you that he won't be found in my skin. Now I must say good-bye; I shall pack up and be off this evening. The sooner I am out of this, the more comfortable it will be for everybody."

She could not let him go like that; yet a quarter of an hour of earnest entreaty and lucid setting forth of all the circumstances proved of no avail to shake his determination. When at length he was asked to say whether it was not the truth—"the honest truth, which you may confess without offending me in the least"—that he now cared more for Dolly Cradock than he had done when he hastily engaged himself to a girl so much less in sympathy with him, he declined to answer the question.

"You can think just exactly what you please about that, Veronica," said he; "if it makes you any happier to imagine that I can be passed on to

somebody else now that you don't want me, by all means imagine it. The only thing that had to be made clear was that you don't want me, and that has been made as clear as daylight by this time."

"You will live to marry her, and you will live to thank me for having left you free to do so," Veronica declared decisively. "What I have to do now is to see the lawyers and find some means of transferring this place to you with your will or against it. To that you had better make up your mind."

Horace, with a slight, disdainful gesture, remarked that it was getting late and that he would just have time to catch his train. "I shall leave a message for Aunt Julia to say that I have been telegraphed for," he added, as he moved towards the door; "I don't want you to be exposed to any annoyance that can be avoided, and white lies are permissible on these occasions. The next time you see your friend Mr. Mostyn, please tell him, with my compliments, that I fully understand how much you and I have to thank him for. And, perhaps, if nobody else will relieve you of Broxham, you might offer the place to him. He is such a true friend that I shouldn't wonder if you were to find him willing to oblige you."

These last words, which were spoken with con-

siderable bitterness, caused Veronica, after she was left to her own reflections, to regret that she had introduced Mr. Mostyn's opinion into a fruitless discussion; but that, after all, was a mere drop in the ocean of her regrets, and she did not dwell upon it. Horace, to be sure, had not behaved quite as generously as he might have done; yet she was fain to allow that he had not behaved unlike a gentleman. He had accepted his dismissal; he had not been unduly reproachful; he had been entirely within his right in refusing either to admit or deny his affection for Dolly Cradock, and he had also, alas! been within his right in scouting the material amends so clumsily proffered to him.

"I had to do what I have done," said Veronica to herself mournfully; "but I have done it in the worst possible way, and what is to be the end of it all I can't see yet. Mr. Walton must manage it for me somehow, and in the meantime I must submit uncomplainingly to the dreadful things which Aunt Julia is sure to do and say."

CHAPTER XXI.

MUSA CONSOLATRIX.

READERS who are blessed with good memories may recollect that they were first introduced to the Reverend John Dimsdale when he was seated in his study on a sunny, windy morning, wrestling with the difficulties and discouragements unhappily inseparable from the labour of composition; and no one who is acquainted with the monotonous routine of working lives, whether lay or clerical, will be surprised to find him occupied in the same way, at the same hour and in the same place exactly twelve months later. A year, it is true, makes a greater or less difference to us all. Things happen; births, deaths or marriages occur; the bodies which we are compelled to carry about with us advance a few steps on their slow progress towards decay; but the land must be tilled, soldiers and sailors must be

drilled, the law must be administered, sermons must be written so long as weary labourers continue to draw the breath of life, and it may be surmised that sermons do not become easier to write when a man has, many years ago, said all he has to say. To be sure, he can keep on repeating what he has said scores of times before, and most preachers adopt this simple plan, but Mr. Dimsdale, who had a troublesome conscience, wanted to find new words in which to clothe old thoughts, and since he could not find them, he was rumpling his hair and plucking at his beard, as of yore, when his wife came in to substitute one form of torture for another.

"John," said she, seating herself comfortably close to the writing-table, "I want to have a little talk with you about Veronica."

Mr. Dimsdale sighed, pushed back his revolving chair, turned, so as to face the disturber of his already disturbed reflections, threw one leg over the other and remarked, "My dear Elizabeth, the talks that we have had for some weeks past about Veronica have been neither little nor few. If you do not know what my views are, I can only say that I despair of being able to give them any clearer expression."

"Well, John," returned his wife good-humouredly, "I dare say I am dull; but the fact is that I don't know a bit what your views are. I know that you have backed her up all through this foolish, vexatious business; but why you have done so and how long you think that it can go on is just what I do *not* understand."

"Yet it seemed to me that I had explained my position," observed the Reverend John, with impatient patience. "The girl breaks off an engagement which was a source of satisfaction to all her friends, her reason for breaking it off being that, on fuller consideration, she finds that she does not love the man enough to marry him. I cannot disapprove of that, although I may regret that the discovery was not made earlier. She proposes to make her estate over to Horace Trevor, who, very properly and as a matter of course, refuses it. I thought the plan a ridiculous and impracticable one, and I told her so; but I really cannot disapprove of an impulse which strikes me as generous. Her aunt—rather cruelly and unnecessarily, in my opinion—chooses to quarrel with her; and, as she cannot very well live all alone in a large country house, she asks me to give her shelter. Considering what are our

obligations to Veronica, you can hardly, I should think, have expected me to refuse so natural a request, and I am quite unable to see the use of teasing and worrying her now that she is here. If that is what you call backing her up, no doubt I have backed her up. You ask how long I think it is going to last. Really, I have not the faintest idea; nor can I tell with any precision what you mean by 'it'!"

"Why, the present state of things, of course. Say what you will, John, it is absurd for a girl with all her money to bury herself alive in a country rectory. Such an arrangement can't be permanent; and, fond as I am of Veronica, I do feel that she ought to be brought to her senses. It is useless for me to speak to her—she sets me down as worldly and heartless and all the rest of it—but a few words from you would carry some weight; and really it is your duty to say them. Some decision as to what her future is to be *must* be arrived at soon."

"Is there any particular reason," inquired Mr. Dimsdale wearily, "for our arriving this morning at a decision which, so far as I can make out, we have no power at all to enforce?"

"Don't talk as if you were on the bench, John,

and as if it were a question of whether the girl was to be sent to a reformatory or committed for trial. I only wanted to tell you that I have had a letter from Mrs. Mansfield—a very kind and sensible letter, too—in which she says that she wishes to make it up again with Veronica and that she will be glad to chaperon her through another season."

"So be it! Veronica's consent must be obtained, though."

"Just so; and I hope you will tell her that it is her duty to consent. Marry she must—I am sure you will agree with me there, John—and as she is determined not to marry poor Mr. Trevor, the sooner she selects somebody else the better."

This sounded so very like truth and common sense that Mr. Dimsdale had nothing to urge against it. Undoubtedly Veronica, situated as she was, would do well to marry; undoubtedly she ought to accept the olive-branch held out to her by her Aunt Julia; so he said that, if he might now be permitted to get on with his work, he would do what was required of him as soon as his niece came in.

Veronica, in accordance with what had become her daily habit, had gone out for a long, objectless

walk. The want of an object, both for her walks and for her existence, had weighed heavily upon her since her return to Harbury Vale, and now, as she wandered along the river-bank, she was wishing with all her heart that she had been spared an inheritance which had brought her nothing but worry and vexation, besides estranging her from those with whom she would fain have maintained friendly relations. The wrath and disgust of Mrs. Mansfield she had anticipated and could forgive; but to be roundly told by Mr. Walton that she was quite the most hopelessly silly young lady whom it had ever been his misfortune to encounter had been a little trying, while Horace's obstinate refusal to play the part assigned to him almost made her repent of what she had done. Perhaps, after all, she had been hopelessly silly—though no respectable solicitor should have permitted himself to use such language. Perhaps, if she had been hopefully wise, or even wise without being hopeful, she would have let matters take their course—made the best of a bad business, and recognised the fact that in this world nobody must expect to get exactly what he or she wants. And the worst of it was that, with the exception of poor old Uncle John, who always

tried to be fair, there was not a single person to understand her or sympathise with her in the smallest degree. Even Joe, upon whose comprehension and fidelity she had implicitly relied, and to whom she had rendered, by post, a full account of her actions as well as of the motives which had prompted them, had been most disappointing. Her long letters to him had only elicited curt and very unsatisfactory replies, which had rendered it only too evident that he shared, without expressing them, the views of Mr. Walton. Finally, Horace had answered a despairing epistolary appeal, addressed to his club, by a note which she had already perused several times, but which she now drew from her pocket and read again, just to keep alive the feeling of justifiable resentment which it had provoked.

"DEAR VERONICA,

"I have received your letter and the communication which your lawyers say that they were instructed to make to me on your behalf. I am sorry that you should have thought there could be any use in giving such instructions or writing such a letter. On my side I cannot see that there

would be any use at all in my repeating what I have said so often before. What your opinion of me can be I know no more than I know what I have done to deserve it; but least said soonest mended. I saw Aunt Julia the other day, and managed at last to persuade her that the time has come for her to stop shedding tears over spilt milk. I do trust that the subject may now be dropped for ever.

"Always sincerely yours,

"HORACE TREVOR."

Now, that really was not at all a nice sort of response to make to two closely written sheets of affectionate entreaty, and it just showed the difficulty of taking any man's measure before subjecting him to a severe test. Mr. Mostyn, indeed, had divined what Horace was at a glance; but then Mr. Mostyn was so abnormally acute! Mr. Mostyn, unhappily, was away from home, having taken himself off to Italy to avoid the cold weather; so that his moral support also was wanting to one who stood in sore need of it.

"How I wish he would come back! Then, at least, I should feel that I had one friend left!"

sighed Veronica; and hardly had she breathed the words when, with truly dramatic promptitude, her revered poet stood before her, his soft felt hat in his hand, his curly, grizzled locks stirred by the wind and a smile of greeting upon his lips.

"I am in advance of the swallows, you see," said he. "It is shameful to abandon Italy for England at a time of the year when Italy is delicious and England detestable; but *che vuole?* I was seized with a sudden attack of home-sickness, and the only cure for that malady is to make straight for home."

"Blessed malady and blessed cure!" exclaimed Veronica. "It isn't everybody who has a home to make for, and I am sure very few people could count upon as heartfelt a welcome as I have at your service. I was just longing for you when you appeared, like a god out of an osier-bed."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Mostyn, raising his eyebrows; "it is lucky I am not twenty years younger."

"It would indeed be most unlucky if you were, because, in that case, I might hesitate to confide all my woes to you. I have been doing terrible things —partly in consequence of your advice, it is true—since we parted."

"So I understand. Not that I think them terrible, or that I repent in the least of my advice."

"You have heard all about it, then?"

"Well, I have heard that that impossible matrimonial scheme has been abandoned. Is there anything more to be told?"

"Heaps more!" answered Veronica emphatically. "The abandonment of a scheme which, I quite agree with you, was an impossible one, is the very least of my troubles—not a trouble at all, in fact; the dreadful thing is that it hasn't brought about any of the results which ought to have followed."

She went on to relate how completely her benevolent designs had been frustrated by the perversity of those for whose benefit they had been formed, while Mr. Mostyn, listening with a kindly, tolerant smile, nodded his head encouragingly every now and then.

"Oh, well!" he said, when she paused, "I don't see that you have so very much to make yourself miserable about. From my point of view, you have done a great deal better than might have been expected. There were a good many dangers before you, you see—the deceitfulness of riches, out of which you seem to have escaped triumphantly; the

voluntary surrender of your highest aspirations, upon which you were bent when I saw you last; even the sacrifice of your inheritance, which, in my humble opinion, you have no right to hand over to the first comer. "Oh, yes! you have done very fairly well, and such incidental bothers as the displeasure of your relations will soon be lived down. At all events, you remain your own mistress and can order the course of your own existence."

"Yes, there is that," agreed Veronica hesitatingly. "To some extent I am at liberty, no doubt. But what is to become of Horace?"

"I do not know him well enough to venture upon a prophecy, and, honestly speaking, his destiny does not interest me. Yours, on the other hand, does; and that is why I am in hopes that you have a few pages of foolscap to show me."

Veronica gave her shoulders a jerk and thrust her hand into her pocket. "It is rubbish," she said; "nobody knows better than I do what rubbish it is. Still, you had better see what I have scribbled at once and have done with it. If I made you beg for a sight of it you might think it was something superior to mere schoolgirl doggerel, and then you would be all the more disappointed."

Mr. Mostyn took the little bundle of manuscript extended to him and ran his eye over one page after another without speaking. Presently he produced a pencil and made a few rapid corrections.

"This is not doggerel," he said at length. "As far as it goes, it is good—very good, even; only you will write far better when metre and rhyme have become your servants instead of your masters. What I want you to understand is that it is worth your while to persevere, and I hope you know that I should not say that unless I could say it conscientiously."

In matters pertaining to art he was invariably conscientious, and the brief, lucid homily which he went on to deliver was of value to his pupil in more ways than one. By the time that he took his leave of her, after appointing her a task to perform and submit to him on a given day, he had so far infected her with his own quiet enthusiasm that the troubles which had looked so large half an hour before now seemed to her to have been reduced to their true insignificant proportions. A poetess she hardly expected to become; but she thought there perhaps might always lie open to her a haven of refuge and oblivion from the calm shelter of which

she would be able to smile at ephemeral cares. In truth, that is why artists ought to be happy people, and very generally are so, despite their vehement protestations to the contrary.

Thus, on her return to the Rectory, she was quite in a fit frame of mind to receive the representations of the Rector, who had possessed himself of Mrs. Mansfield's conciliatory missive and waved it at her persuasively, while pointing out how much family quarrels are to be deprecated.

"I ask nothing better than to be friends with Aunt Julia again," she declared, "and I know very well what good reason I have given her for losing all patience with me; but as for going through another London season under her protection, that is a very different thing. To her it could only be a disappointing thing, because I have made up my mind now to live and die an old maid, and to me it would be a weariness of the flesh, because I have seen all that I want to see of fashionable life. But, of course, if I am in your way or a trouble to you here, I will go."

Mr. Dimsdale combed his beard with his long fingers, moved restlessly about the room and began: "My dear Veronica, the very least thing that we

can do, in return for your generosity to us, is to give you a home——"

"If you talk like that," interrupted Veronica, "I shall leave to-morrow."

"Well, well, my dear, I know what you mean, and I trust that I have acted rightly in accepting your help, though I cannot always feel sure about it. But what I was going to say was that it is almost imperative upon you to marry, and that you ought not to neglect occasions of meeting some possible husband. You must, I take it, eventually reside upon your estates, and a single woman of your age who attempts to live in that way necessarily finds herself confronted by a thousand obstacles."

"All of which," remarked Veronica, laughing, "can be obliterated by a few strokes with a pen. My estates will not trouble me long; because I intend to transfer them to some other luckless, or lucky, person."

"But the other person, as I understand, won't have them."

"One other person won't; but I have a second string to my bow — even a third, and perhaps a fourth. Now, Uncle John, you who know human nature so well — for you could not preach the

sermons you do unless you knew it—must be well aware that people are not so desperately disobliging as all that. Why, you collected as much as three pounds four shillings and twopence for the victims of an earthquake last week; and can you doubt that somewhere or other there is a kind soul to be found who will accept several thousand acres of earth that is never likely to quake, rather than leave it as a burden upon the hands of a distressed fellow-creature?"

"This is trifling, Veronica," said the Reverend John, shaking his head. "But at all events, you will write a pleasant letter to your Aunt Julia, will you not?"

"Oh, yes! I will write her a pleasant letter," answered Veronica, "as soon as I have satisfied the cravings of an enormous appetite. Now may I have some lunch, please?"

CHAPTER XXII.

JOSEPH IS WILLING TO OBLIGE.

WHO would not wish, for choice, to be at peace with all the world? Judging by the law reports and the telegraphic despatches from foreign capitals which enliven our breakfast-tables every morning, there must be quite a large number of persons who prefer a different state of things; but to judge people by their utterances is almost always a mistake, and perhaps we should come nearer to the truth if we were to assume that our neighbours were made of very much the same clay as ourselves. Now, nothing can be more certain than that we, the writer and readers of these words, are and always have been satisfied with a recognition of our bare rights—are even, it may be, willing to dispense with some of these for the sake of a quiet life. Veronica,

therefore, who was not at all more unreasonable than the rest of her sex, gladly accepted Mrs. Mansfield's overtures, and despatched so amiable and humble a reply to South Audley Street that her reluctance to quit rural scenes for the moment was overlooked. The next post brought a second letter from Aunt Julia, conceived in a spirit of true kindliness and forbearance.

"My dear Veronica" (she wrote), "I entirely agree with you in thinking that the less we say for the future about what is now past and cannot be helped the better. Perhaps I spoke rather too sharply to you before we left Broxham, and if I did, I can only say that I am sorry; but you must admit—and I am glad to see you *do* admit—that I had very great provocation. As for quarrelling with those whom I love, it is a thing that I never have been able to do, though they have generally tried their very best to make me, and you may be sure that when you come to London you will find no difference whatever in me. Horace, who called here a day or two ago, is, I am glad to tell you, in his usual health and spirits, and laughed most good-humouredly at the idea that he cherished any unfriendly feeling towards you. There are very few

men, I should think, who would so readily pardon a girl for having made them look ridiculous; but of course, as everybody says, Horace can afford to display generosity. Universally liked and admired as he is, he has the consolation (if he wants any) of knowing that his friends' pity is bestowed rather upon you than upon him, and, after all, it isn't as if he would ever have the slightest difficulty in making a really brilliant match. At the present moment, I know of more than one—however, this will hardly interest you; I only wanted you to understand that the self-reproach of which you speak in your letter, and which I can't call unbecoming, is no longer necessary.

"By the way, I hear that there is every probability of a marriage being arranged between your friend Dolly Cradock and Mr. Hornblower, the well-known M.F.H., of whom you may have heard. He is a widower and not very young, but has plenty of money, I believe; so it sounds suitable. Personally, as you know, I never could endure the girl's vulgarity, and Horace, good-natured though he is, must have found her a dreadful bore during her interminable visit to you; but no doubt she has good qualities which I am not clever enough to

discern, or you would not have taken such a fancy to her."

Mrs. Mansfield concluded what was meant for a very astute composition with many expressions of goodwill, and Veronica, reading between the lines easily enough, was both amused and satisfied. That Dolly Cradock was about to espouse a wealthy old gentleman she believed no more than she did that Horace was hesitating as to which out of a number of possible brilliant matches he should make; but it was a comfort to be told that she was no longer in disgrace, and she kept Aunt Julia's written statement, foreseeing that a time might come when it would prove useful for purposes of quotation.

For the present, at any rate, there was nothing to be done but to await events and make the best use that could be made of Mr. Mostyn's benevolent instructions in the art of poetry. These were bestowed upon her by the great critic without stint. Scarcely a day passed on which he did not either stroll up to the Rectory or appoint a meeting-place with her elsewhere; and although he was somewhat chary of his praise, he gave her sufficient encouragement to make her happy.

"All this," he told her one day, "is only school-

ing; and the reason why there are more public failures in literature than in any other branch of art is that most people embark upon it without any preliminary schooling at all. You must not think of putting these early efforts into the fire; for the ideas are good and will be of use to you later. But the form is not quite right yet. Have patience, and a time will come when you will be able to see your poems in print and rejoice that they have been printed. I know at least one unfortunate poet who suffers acutely from the contemplation of his juvenile essays."

"As if my very best could ever approach your very worst!" exclaimed Veronica.

"My worst is about as bad as anything can be, and my best is no more than tolerable. If I am remembered at all after my death it will be for my criticisms upon other men's work, which are more careful than the general run of English criticisms. But to speak the plain truth, my dear Miss Dimsdale, neither you nor I have it in us to be really great. What we can do, and what we are doing, is to educate ourselves, so that we may be able to distinguish great things from small. The task is a tedious and difficult one; but it is worth under-

taking. Indeed, I often doubt whether anything else in the world is worth undertaking."

This seemed to be putting the case rather strongly; but some exaggeration was permissible to a man whose aims were so lofty and who was so admirably free from all sordid taint. He applauded Veronica's indifference to wealth, assuring her that what the majority of mankind believe to be of such vast importance has very little to do with the actual meaning of life.

"One takes things as they come and shapes one's course accordingly," he said. "Responsibilities cannot be altogether evaded; but, with a just sense of proportion, they can soon be reduced to their proper level. When you have written a sonnet in which I am unable to pick a hole, you will have gone a long way towards fulfilling the object of your existence; somebody who has not your special gifts must be paid to see that no holes can be picked in the management of your estates."

Veronica asked whether it would not be a simpler and better plan to endow somebody else with a special gift of the estates which she did not want; but Mr. Mostyn replied, with a smile, that that plan struck him as lacking simplicity.

"You have already tried to put it into practice," he remarked, "and you have had an opportunity of observing consequent complications. My advice to you is to attempt no further experiments in that direction, and to stick to what cannot any longer fairly be called experiments. By this time next year you will be looking at poetry and prose from such a totally different point of view that you will scarcely recognise yourself."

It might be so, Veronica thought; but she did not quite see why, even if she were destined to become a second Mrs. Browning, the Broxham property should be less of a white elephant to her. Profoundly as she admired and respected Cyril Mostyn, there were moments when his language seemed to her to have an artificial ring, and when she longed for five minutes of the sober common-sense of Joe Dimsdale—or even of Horace Trevor. Not that she really wished to see Horace again. He had forfeited all claim upon her regard by the very rude and unfeeling reply which he had made to her letter—a reply, moreover, which had dispelled any lingering doubt that she might have entertained as to the nature of the regard which he had once professed to feel for her. But Joseph—although he, too, had

exhibited himself in a somewhat disappointing light of late—was less unpardonable; and a very great as well as wholly unexpected pleasure it was to see his tall, loosely knit figure advancing to meet her when she was returning one evening from her accustomed riverside haunts.

"You dear old boy!" she exclaimed, holding out both her hands to him with a cordiality which she could not repress, though she knew that he hardly deserved it. "What has brought you home?"

"Great Northern Railway to King's Cross and Great Western from Paddington," replied Joe. "Likewise filial duty; likewise a long-cherished wish to tell you what I think of you, my dear. I found that I could be spared for about ten days, so I thought a little holiday might be good for me and others."

"It is good for me, at all events, to see you again," Veronica declared. "That is, unless you are going to scold me. But I hope you will not be so foolish."

"I shall not be so foolish, Veronica. What is the use of flogging a dead horse—or a dead donkey either, saving your presence? You have been and gone and done it now, so that scolding would serve no good purpose, would it?"

"None whatever," answered Veronica, placing herself at once in a mental fighting attitude; "so please don't fulfil your threat of telling me what you think of me. I have no wish to hear."

"The worst of it is," remarked Joe, lighting his pipe with much deliberation, "that I don't quite see my way to talk to you at all without expressing my sentiments. Added to which I don't know of any reason why I shouldn't express them."

"Surely you might allow me to take them for granted! You think what everybody else, except Mr. Mostyn and Uncle John, thinks; you have no patience with me for having upset a comfortable, convenient arrangement at the last moment, and you are not at all disposed to give me credit for having done what I did simply because it was unavoidable. I might have expected you to be a little more generous and a little less dense; but never mind. One comfort is that I need not apologise to you, since you will be in no way a loser by what has occurred."

"Dear me! Who would ever have suspected you of having such a shrewish temper? Man and boy, I have known you, I may say, all my life, Veronica, and this is the first time that I have heard you make

a really nasty speech. But I am not offended. I can feel for a young woman who has every reason to be ashamed of herself and who falls back, as women always do, upon abuse when she is conscious of having no defence to offer."

"Joseph, you are trying to make me lose my temper, and you might spare yourself the trouble, for you will not succeed. I am not going to be put upon my defence by you, nor have I said anything in the least abusive. Now let us change the subject. I hope you have been getting some shooting in Lincolnshire lately."

"It is kind of you to hope so, my dear; but shooting comes to an end on the same date in Lincolnshire as in the other parts of England. Consequently, I have been devoting my whole time and attention of late to the study of agriculture, as per agreement; and I trust you will not have cause to regret your liberality in providing me with the means of completing my education."

Veronica thought this last allusion so cruel and in such bad taste that she had much ado to keep the tears out of her eyes. She walked on for some yards before she could trust sufficiently to the steadiness of her voice to remark—

"Well, if I have made a nasty speech to you, you have made a very nasty one to me now. So we may cry quits." And then, letting her dignity go by the board, "Don't *you* turn against me, Joe!" she exclaimed beseechingly; "I have so few friends left!"

"Portrait of one of 'em," returned Joe, tapping himself on the breast. "Now, Veronica, you know very well that I shouldn't turn against you if you had committed a murder, instead of only having tried to cut your own throat; but I must say that you are a bit aggravating. I dare say you will have the grace to admit that you have kicked up all this dust about nothing when I tell you a piece of news which only reached me yesterday. I have the pleasure to inform you that a marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Miss Cradock and an old chap of the name of Hornblower who has lots of tin and keeps any number of horses What do you think of that, my dear?"

"Oh, I heard from Aunt Julia that there was a probability of that engagement," answered Veronica indifferently. "I think that, as she says, it sounds suitable; but I don't know why you should have thought it was likely to have any special interest for me."

"Come, Veronica, this is hardly fair upon an old pal, from whom you used to have no secrets once upon a time. You don't expect me to believe that you weren't madly jealous of Miss Dolly Cradock when you broke with Trevor, do you?"

"I am sorry to say, Joseph," answered Veronica, "that I can expect nothing reasonable of you in your present mood. I certainly did hope and think that Dolly and Horace would marry, because I am sure that they are fond of one another; but I suppose the truth is that they are both too selfish to face poverty, and unfortunately they cannot be persuaded to accept comparative riches. As for jealousy—but it really isn't worth while to protest against such accusations. As you know, I never pretended to be in love with Horace. At first I thought that I could marry him without being in love with him; but afterwards I found that I couldn't, and so I was obliged to break off the engagement. That is the long and the short of the whole business."

Joe looked a good deal disconcerted. He had evidently anticipated that the intelligence which he had probably journeyed to Harbury Vale for the sole purpose of imparting to his cousin would have a

very different effect upon her, and Veronica was not ungrateful to him for his well-meant interference. It was, however, necessary to make him recognise that he had been under a complete misapprehension, and, after hearing all that she had to say, he was fain to acquiesce sadly in accomplished facts.

"And what do you propose to do now, Veronica?" he asked at length.

"That is just what I was going to tell you, and that is just where I hope I may count upon your help, Joseph. Of course, if I could have made over Broxham to Horace Trevor, I should have preferred to do so: but it is now quite certain that he will not take the property from me, and it is quite as certain that I can't retain it with any comfort to myself. Therefore I wish to transfer it with as little delay as possible to the person who would inherit it if I were to die to-morrow; and you are that person, Joseph. It is true that you are rather young; but you know something about the management of an estate by this time, and you like a country life, and you can't possibly have the same objections that Horace has to relieving me of my burden."

"Well, no," answered Joe consideringly; "I can't plead those objections, certainly."

"And after a time you will marry, and perhaps I shall be godmother to one of your children, and I shall come and stay with you sometimes."

Joe nodded. "It all sounds very nice and very practicable," he agreed.

"Then let us look upon it as settled. You have no idea what a weight you have taken off my mind!"

"Stop a bit," said Joe, knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the heel of his boot and taking some time over the operation. "Of course you are making me a very handsome offer, Veronica, and I don't deny that the life of a country gentleman would suit me rather better than any other; still, a step of this kind ought not to be taken without considering ways and means, and I doubt whether I could afford to live at Broxham even if the place belonged to me. It's a big house, you see, and from what I heard when I was with you there I am afraid the rent-roll isn't as big as it ought to be."

"Oh, but I will provide the means as well," said Veronica. "At least, I will, unless you object to taking money from me."

"That will simplify matters," observed Joe. "No, I don't object to taking money any more than I do

to taking land: after all, you are only giving me what you don't want. How large a sum will it be?"

"Well—it shall be sufficient; I don't think I ought to say more until I have consulted Mr. Walton," answered Veronica: for the truth was that she had hardly expected to find Joe so business-like, and she could not help feeling a little disappointed in him.

"Quite right," answered the young fellow, nodding approvingly. "If this thing is to be done at all it must be done in cold blood, and we must both of us know what we are about. Meanwhile, we had better keep the project to ourselves in case it should never come off. Don't you think so?"

Veronica had no doubt as to that, nor was she unwilling to agree to Joe's further suggestion that they should now dismiss the whole subject from their minds.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DOWNFALL OF AN IDOL.

To decide in haste is almost always to repent at leisure, and Veronica was not wholly exempt from an experience which few men and still fewer women escape. In vain she told herself that her determination to resign Broxham had been consistent and well considered; in vain she pleaded with her conscience that she had used every possible effort to do what was right in her surrender of the property, and that it was no fault of hers if in this particular case right had proved, through obstinacy and perversity, to be left. Conscience, not less obstinate and, perhaps, not less perverse, persisted in asserting that Horace Trevor was an injured man.

"But not by me!" Veronica returned, tossing uneasily upon her bed at an hour when she ought to have been fast asleep. "How can I help his

having fallen to the ground between two stools? Why did he try to sit upon both? Why did he make me believe that he loved me when it was as evident as could be that he really cared for Dolly Cradock? If he is disappointed, now that she has shown herself in her true colours, he has only himself to blame. What more could I do than beg him to take the place off my hands? As he chose to refuse, and refused rather rudely too, I was obliged to make the best of a *pis-aller*."

Conscience declined to be silenced by such excuses, and, after many unavailing repetitions of them, Veronica, being a tolerably healthy young woman, adopted the most conclusive of all arguments by allowing slumber to overpower her.

On the following day, however, she could not refrain from partially letting Joe into the secret of her misgivings. She did not hint at any desire on her part to retract her offer—that, she felt, would be hardly fair, especially as the young fellow did not seem to think that she could be contemplating such a course—but she did confess that she felt rather sorry for poor Horace.

"Well, yes," answered Joe; "he has certainly got the worst of it all round. Being sorry for him

won't help him, though, and as you can't give him what he wants, you had better not worry yourself with thinking about him any more."

"It is all very fine to talk like that," returned Veronica, rather sharply; "but how can I help worrying myself? I know I was perfectly right to release him from his engagement, and I don't for a moment suppose that he would wish to renew it now, if it could be renewed——"

"Rather not! A man who would give a girl a second chance, after having been treated as you treated him, would be a most consummate ass; and Trevor isn't an ass."

"I never said he was, Joseph, and I wish you wouldn't interrupt. But although he may be well rid of me, it is rather hard upon him to have lost what he ought to have inherited from Uncle Samuel —not to speak of having lost Dolly Cradock."

"Brought up in a pious household, as you have been, Veronica," remarked Joe, "you must be familiar with David's hasty assertion that all men are liars. He ought never to have said such a thing, and I won't degrade myself to his level by declaring that all women are humbugs. Still there is no denying that most of them are, and very sorry I am to find

that you belong to the majority. You know as well as I do, and probably a great deal better, that although that Cradock girl might perhaps have accepted Trevor if he had proposed to her, he never did propose to her, nor ever thought of doing such a thing."

"I know nothing of the sort," returned Veronica. "What I do know is that he couldn't afford to marry a poor woman, and that she couldn't afford to marry a poor man."

"Rubbish! He has never cared a brass farthing for any woman but you, and you don't improve your case by pretending to doubt that. Them is my sentiments, Veronica; and I regret that they should make you so red and angry."

A little red in the face Veronica might have been, but she was not angry, as her next words, which were spoken in quite a mild, diffident tone of voice, proved. "Have you seen him or heard from him," she asked, "since—since that horrid time?"

"I have had one or two letters from him," answered Joe; "but I burnt them, because it isn't fair to remember all that a poor chap writes when he is down on his luck. He'll get over it, you know —everybody gets over everything in time—and then,

of course, he'll wonder why he should have made such a fuss about such a trifle. The loss of a nice property is no trifle, I grant you; but that couldn't be avoided. Trevor is such a good fellow that I dare say he will be glad to hear of his loss being my gain."

"You cannot," observed Veronica, after a pause, "be more convinced of his being a good fellow than I am; and if he has any regrets, as you seem to think that he has, I am sure mine must be quite as keen as his, and will last as long. Perhaps, when you write to him again, you will tell him that, Joseph. I suppose it is just possible that he may believe it."

"It is possible: I shouldn't say that it was altogether likely. But this is very unprofitable talk. What's done can't be undone, and the only thing for us to do now, as sensible people, is to make the best of existing circumstances. If I am to take this property off your hands, Veronica—and really, if it is not to go to Trevor, I think it might as well go to me as to anybody else—we ought not to lose time about seeing your lawyers and making some definite arrangement. The most satisfactory plan, I think, would be for me to be present at the interview.

Then I should hear exactly what the estate is worth, and I could state pretty nearly how much additional income I should require in order to enable me to do as you wish."

"Very well," answered Veronica, trying not to think what a deteriorating influence wealth, or the prospect of acquiring it, exercises upon all human beings. "Ought we both to go up to London, then?"

"I should say so. Mrs. Mansfield will give you house-room for a night or two, I suppose, and I know a fellow who will put me up at his rooms, if I ask him. I shall make some excuse to my fond parents, and you may as well do the same, because there's no use in telling them what is up until the thing is settled, one way or the other. The lawyers, you see, are sure to raise all manner of difficulties, and you yourself may alter your mind."

"I shall not alter it in this instance," answered Veronica. And she felt constrained to add: "I did not think you would be so hard and unsympathetic about it all."

"Did you expect me to plump down upon my knees and burst into tears of gratitude? Now, look here, Veronica; you have done a lot for me, and

I'm not ungrateful for benefits received; but when you wonder at my not thanking you for what you propose to do now, you should bear in mind what you are asking of me. I shall be called a robber; my own people will think pretty meanly of me, though they may be glad that I am provided for; I shall let myself in for no end of bother, and what shall I get in exchange? A big house, a comfortable income and fairly good shooting? But I have no fancy for big houses, and my shooting has improved so much of late that I shall always be sure of as many invitations as I can accept. Upon my word and honour, I would far rather be a land-agent than a landlord. Consequently, if I see my way to consent to your proposal, I shall consent simply and solely in order to oblige you. As for sympathy, you mustn't demand it of me just at present. You haven't behaved in a way that I can sympathise with, Veronica, and that's the truth."

Veronica did not care to justify herself. She was not pleased with Joe, and was all the less pleased with him because, from a common-sense point of view, his censure was merited. However, there was at least one person—apparently there was only one—who could appreciate what her difficulties had

been, and who even approved of the manner in which she had dealt with them. So that when, shortly after the above conversation had taken place, Mr. Mostyn was announced, his reception was of the warmest character.

"I was longing for you!" his pupil exclaimed. "Let us go out into the garden, if you don't mind; I want to abuse everybody, except you, with plenty of space and fresh air round me."

The weather was mild and sunny, so Mr. Mostyn, who only loved fresh air so long as there was no unpleasant nip of east wind in it, smiled and assented, remarking that the human race, with the one honourable exception which she had mentioned, would find no enthusiastic champion in him.

"This world," said he, while he carefully picked his way across the moist lawn beside the swiftly stepping Veronica, "is inhabited by beings of whom many are cruel, most selfish and nearly all stupid. Every now and then it is a relief to abuse them, although the best plan, generally speaking, is to accept them for what they are and keep one's temper. What particular miscreant has been rousing your ire to-day?"

Veronica led the way to a somewhat damp and

mouldering bench, upon which she threw herself down before replying discontentedly: "Oh, I don't know, after all, that I ought not to rail at myself instead of at other people. Perhaps it is my own fault that everything goes askew with me."

The poet followed her example, after tucking his coat-tails under him. "This means," he observed, "that your relations have been urging you to reconsider your decision and to beckon Mr. Horace Trevor back again."

Veronica said it did not mean that, but she confessed that the one of her relations whose support, or at least comprehension, she had counted upon had not answered to her expectations. "And it makes me feel as if I should have done more wisely to leave things as they were and marry Horace. He would have been kind to me, and I should have tried not to interfere with him, and I dare say the failure wouldn't have been so complete as my actual failure is."

"I must be allowed to demur to the assertion that you have made any actual failure," returned Mr. Mostyn, smiling. "You are depressed and irritated to-day, as we all are sometimes, but that feeling will pass off. If you had carried out your

scheme of marrying a man who is essentially prosaic, your depression and irritation would have become chronic, not occasional. I speak of what I know; for, like you, I am blessed or afflicted with the invariable poetic temperament, and it has taken me all my life to reduce it to a state of partial discipline."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Veronica dubiously; "but you differ from me in being a man. I suppose men can endure loneliness better than we can."

"Well, it is more tolerable to be alone than to be forced into uncongenial company; but why should you be alone? Just now you did me the honour to except me from the general condemnation. I don't know that I deserve such a compliment; but I am sure that the more chances you give me of deserving it the happier I shall be. Perhaps also you might in some very slight degree increase your own happiness by letting me see you oftener."

Veronica expressed the gratitude she felt in language which doubtless flattered the poet's vanity, accustomed though his ears were to flattering speeches. "But," she added, "in spite of all your

kindness and friendliness, you can never prevent my life from being a lonely one. For one thing, even if you don't grow tired of me and my feeble little attempts at rhyme, I shall so seldom see you! Only when you happen to be down here, and perhaps not then, for I am beginning to understand that this cannot be my permanent home."

Mr. Mostyn rose and walked away for a few paces. Then he returned and stood looking down upon Veronica with kindly compassionate eyes. "You are hardly more than a child," he said, "and I am almost an old man. Yet one knows of cases in which crabbed age and youth have managed to dwell together in contentment. Veronica, will you give me the right to live with you and take care of you until one of us dies? Don't mind laughing at me if the suggestion strikes you as irresistibly comic."

It did not strike Veronica in that light—on the contrary it brought the tears into her eyes—but she said at once that she could never accept an offer so obviously inspired by pity. "Only I shall always be proud to remember that you have done me this great honour," she declared; "it will be something to think of when I am inclined to doubt

—as I know I often shall be—whether anyone has ever regarded me otherwise than with a sort of amused scorn."

Her lover (for such he boldly asserted himself to be) resumed his seat beside her, took her hand, and explained very gently and quietly how far she was from entering into his meaning. He would have spoken long ago, he said, but had been restrained by the not unnatural diffidence which beseemed a man old enough to be her father. Even now, he hardly liked to tell her of his doubts—his repressed hopes—his absurd and unwarrantable jealousies. All he could venture to offer her was protection, appreciation, a tender and respectful sympathy. If these could by any means be made to suffice, they should be hers at a word.

Veronica almost felt that they might be made to suffice. She had, it was true, broken off a previous engagement on the specific ground that marriage without love was an experiment too dangerous to be essayed; but then she very well remembered having told Horace at the time that she could and would have married him if they had had anything in common, and with Cyril Mostyn she had more in common than with any other man of her acquaint-

ance. Moreover, protection and appreciation—especially protection—seemed to her to be the very things of which she stood most sorely in need. So, after a moment or two of silence and self-interrogation, she made the reply which had, perhaps, been expected of her.

"And of this, at any rate, I can feel sure," she added with a smile, "that you are not offering to marry me for the sake of my money. I don't know whether I could have felt sure of that if you had been anybody else."

"I hope I need not tell you," rejoined the poet, "that to me money appears to be about the most contemptible of the many false gods which poor humanity has set up for itself."

"Yes, I know you think so; all your writings show it; and it is a point upon which you and I are absolutely agreed. Anyhow, my husband's riches will be very little if at all increased by me; for I may tell you, in strict confidence, that I have now arranged to bestow the Broxham estate upon my cousin, Joe Dimsdale, and as he will require additional means in order to keep up the property, I have promised that he shall have as much as I can spare of my income into the bargain. Then I

am more or less pledged to help dear old Uncle John; so that if I reserve a few hundreds a year for myself that will be all I shall be able to manage."

"My dear girl," remonstrated Mr. Mostyn, laughing, "your Quixotry would be admirable if it had not the drawback which attaches to all Quixotry. Of course such a programme is out of the question; your cousin could never agree to it."

"But he *has* agreed to it."

"Is it possible? Then I am afraid that I must say that *I* cannot agree to it. I should be ashamed of myself if I were to consent to such a suicidal act on my wife's part."

"Perhaps you would be right," answered Veronica reflectively; "I can understand your feeling in that way. Only, you see, the act will have been committed before I become your wife."

Mr. Mostyn shook his head, still laughing. "I assure you that it will not! I must save you from yourself, as well as from your friends, and I beg to say most distinctly that our engagement must be contingent upon your undertaking not to sign away an acre of your land or a shilling of your fortune."

He really meant it, although it took Veronica some little time to realize that he was speaking seriously. What shocked her beyond measure was that, at the end of a somewhat warm discussion, she extracted from him an avowal for which she had been wholly unprepared.

"I should be sorry to see you despoiled," said he; "but I must confess that I myself do not wish to be despoiled either. I am not more greedy than my neighbours—possibly even a little less so—but I am not less subject to the material conditions which govern our lives here below. I am, in fact, a comparatively poor man, and I feel no inclination at all, at my age, to double my expenses for the sake of enriching Master Joe Dimsdale."

"Then," said Veronica firmly, "I cannot be your wife."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not if you remain obdurate, I am afraid. Can you not understand that life is prose, and that poetry is only the pleasant illusion which helps us to forget for a time what we actually are?"

"Oh," murmured Veronica, aghast, "how small you are!"

She had imagined him great, and was proportion-

ately disappointed and disgusted; but, in truth, there was no more ground for her disgust than there had been for her illusion. As a poet Cyril Mostyn was relatively great; as a critic he was positively so; viewed from a moral standpoint, he was of about the average size and weight. He was justified in boasting that he was not more greedy than his neighbours, for he had never treated his art as a means of making money nor even deigned to court that popularity which commands large sales; on the other hand, he was rather self-indulgent and had no notion of giving up small luxuries for the sake of a sentimental idea. This, stated with such elegant periphrasis as the occasion seemed to demand, was what he strove to render intelligible; and, although he met with scanty success, he went away without appreciable loss of self-esteem.

Veronica, for her part, sought the seclusion of her own chamber in a frame of mind bordering upon despair. Many human beings, Mr. Mostyn had said, are cruel, most are selfish, and nearly all stupid. He himself, it appeared, deserved a place in each of the former categories; she was by no means certain that he ought not also to be included in the last. And the rest of them were like him—even Joe, who

had shown such a business-like determination to take as much as he could get.

"If I have had one disinterested friend in all my life," sighed Veronica disconsolately, "it has been Horace Trevor, and he will never be my friend again."

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOB'S COMFORTERS.

"So you and Joe are to go up to London together to-morrow, I hear, Veronica," remarked Deborah Dimsdale cheerfully, a few days later. "I am very glad you have made up your mind to leave. Not, of course, that we shall not miss you; but it can't be good for you to stay moping here, and you look so pale and miserable. It isn't as if you had plenty of occupations to take you out of yourself, as I have."

Deborah, who had been visiting the poor of the parish, had returned from her ministrations with a fine colour and an empty basket. There was not much to make the present or the future bright for this poor, insignificant, unlovely little person; but she took life as she found it and had no complaints to make, as Veronica noticed, with some envy and a little compunction.

"I shall not be away for long, you know," the latter observed; "I have to interview the lawyers and the dressmaker, and Aunt Julia has kindly offered to take me in for a couple of nights or so; but my business will soon be transacted."

"Oh, I don't expect to see you here again before the summer," returned Deborah, laughing; "when once you are in London you will stay there, and all these foolish misunderstandings will be cleared up, I hope and believe. You never speak to me about yourself, Veronica, and I don't venture to ask questions; but, of course, I have heard the whole story, and now that that tiresome Miss Cradock has been disposed of, I am sure you and Mr. Trevor will make it up, like sensible people. Stupid as I am supposed to be, I *have* had some experience of lovers and their ways of going on. There was a very similar case to yours in the village last year. Betts, the baker, you know, and Sally Miles, whom he has since married. I always told Sally that, if she would only have patience, all would end well; and, sure enough, that pretty girl at the Seven Stars whom he took it in his silly head to run after jilted him for a commercial traveller; after which——"

"The analogy would be perfect," interrupted

Veronica, "if I had been forsaken by Mr. Trevor and if I were going up to London to meet him. The only respect in which I differ from Sally Miles is that her ambition was to marry, whereas mine is to remain single."

But Deborah knew a great deal better than to believe that, and signs were not wanting that other members of the household shared her amiable anticipations. It was just as well not to undeceive them or to insist too much upon the necessity which had arisen for holding a consultation with Mr. Walton. When the results of that consultation should be divulged there would, no doubt, be some protests and lamentations; but these would be curtailed by the knowledge that they came too late—probably also by a little irrepressible joy at Joe's good fortune. If Veronica was disposed at this time to form somewhat cynical appreciations of her fellow-creatures, it must be owned that she was not wholly without excuse.

One small consolation was that Joe had now become much pleasanter and more like his old self. By mutual consent Veronica and he had ceased to discuss the future, leaving that and all questions connected with it to be dealt with in the unemotional atmosphere of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and reverting,

just for these few days, to old familiar habits, which must perforce be shortly abandoned for ever. This was made more easy by the departure of Mr. Mostyn, who had left home, and who, it was understood, had gone to seek refreshment in those Parisian literary circles which he always declared to be essential as an occasional corrective to insularity.

"If that beggar would have himself naturalized as a Frenchman at once, I don't think Great Britain would be much the poorer," Joe remarked, strolling leisurely towards home with Veronica, after a satisfactory morning with the ferret; "what you can see in him to venerate so respectfully has always been a mystery to me."

"I cannot help admiring his work," she answered; "I don't admire him personally quite as much as I once did."

"Oh, you've found him out at last, eh?"

"I suppose so; one ends by finding everybody out. At least, one finds that very few people are exactly what one took them for."

"One does indeed!" said Joe. "At the same time I must confess that I never took your friend Mostyn for anything but a wind-bag. How and where did you contrive to stick a pin into him?"

Veronica did not at first feel that she would be

justified in answering the question; yet she knew Joe to be thoroughly trustworthy, and she had been wont to admit him into her full confidence in days gone by, and her present sense of isolation weighed so heavily upon her that at length, after binding him to secrecy, she made up her mind to relate what had passed between her and her dethroned demi-god.

"Don't you think it was disgusting of him?" she asked in conclusion.

"Well, if you come to that," answered Joe impartially, "no, I don't. When a man offers to make a certain bargain he isn't bound to accept a totally different one. I grant you that *you* would have been disgusting if you had agreed to marry that fellow upon any terms, and I was very much afraid that you would agree to marry him until I heard, to my relief, that he had decamped."

"You don't mean to say, Joseph, that you ever expected him to propose to me!"

"Strange to relate, Veronica, that is just what I did expect, and have been expecting ever since you became a full-blown heiress. Luckily for you, there is every prospect of your soon ceasing to be a temptation to poets and others. I flatter myself that if I step into your shoes I shall not run the

same risks. It will take an uncommonly clever woman to persuade me that she is enamoured of my personal charms."

"There is such a thing as being too suspicious," remarked Veronica, not best pleased with his tone.

"I am quite willing to take your word for that, my dear. You ought to know. The mistake which some people are apt to make is in suspecting those whom they ought to trust and trusting those whom they ought to see through. Now, Trevor, for instance, is a man who can be trusted through thick and thin, and——"

"I never distrusted him at all," interrupted Veronica impatiently. "You don't or won't understand why I had no choice but to break off that unfortunate engagement; and there is no use talking any more about it. I thought you agreed with me that bygones had better be bygones."

"Of course I do," replied Joe. "Only it isn't a bad plan to bear bygone errors in mind. Then, perhaps, one may be preserved from making a fool of one's self a second time."

One does not always get a second chance of doing so, nor could Veronica feel as confident as she would fain have felt that she was not about to make a fool

of herself in a new direction. However, Joe did not seem to be troubled with any misgivings upon that head. On the way up to London, the next day, he spoke freely to his travelling-companion of the life which he proposed to lead when Broxham should have passed into his hands.

"I shall have to keep a part of the house permanently closed until I marry," he observed. "Marriage, of course, is inevitable—rather a bore; but there's no help for it. I shall look out for some sensible young woman who understands housekeeping; but I dare say I shan't find her for a year or two, and in the meantime the furniture must take its chance of moth and dry-rot."

"Poor Aunt Julia!" interpolated Veronica, with a sigh; "she did so throw her heart into the furnishing!"

"Poor thing! Well, I might let her have it at a valuation if she cared to take it away, because I shan't be using the rooms. For some time to come the house must be a bachelor establishment; but I shall do what I can to improve the property and I shall take care to keep the shooting up."

"Will you ever ask Horace to shoot with you, do you think?" asked Veronica, with an effort.

"Oh, yes; I won't fail to ask him. Why not?"

"Won't it be rather painful for him?"

"I shouldn't wonder if he did find it a bit painful just at first, but one gets accustomed to all sorts of funny things. And he has no quarrel with *me*, you see."

"I hope he has no quarrel with me either."

"H'm! he must be something very like an angel in human form if he hasn't. That's a forbidden subject though, isn't it?"

Veronica was of opinion that, so far as Joe was concerned, it had better remain forbidden; but she wished very much that she could see Horace and conclude a treaty of peace. Rudely and unfairly as he had hitherto met her advances, she longed to renew them and even to offer the apology which perhaps, after all, he had some title to exact. At the bottom of her heart there had always lurked a faint hope that he would permit her to redress her wrongs, and now that that was no longer possible, her anger against him was fast melting into compassion.

When the train reached Paddington, where Mrs. Mansfield's footman was in attendance upon the

platform, Joe said: "I wouldn't mention to your aunt what has brought you up to London, if I were you. She'll only want to argue with you, and it's as well to be able to put a stop to argument by announcing that it comes a day too late. I assume, of course, that you have quite made up your mind."

"Oh, yes! I have quite made up my mind," answered Veronica.

"Because if you haven't, please say so; you won't disappoint me, I can assure you. Only I would rather not state in the presence of your lawyers that I am prepared to accept the property, subject to certain conditions, and then be informed that you have thought better of your plan. That wouldn't place me in quite the most becoming possible attitude for the portrait of a gentleman, you see."

"You need not be under the slightest apprehension," replied Veronica, a little coldly.

"All right; then I'll call in South Audley Street for you about half-past ten to-morrow morning. I think you said you had made an appointment with Mr. Walton for eleven o'clock."

Veronica said she would be ready at the hour named, and took leave of her cousin with as much

cordiality as she could bring herself to display. This practical, hard-headed young man was not the boy who had been her friend in old days; he was not even the Joe with whom she had gone out ferreting twenty-four hours ago. But boys, unfortunately, grow up into men, and friendship is a word of elastic interpretation, and the less one expects of one's fellow-mortals, the less likely one is to be troubled with headaches and heartaches.

To plead that she had a headache (as, in truth, she had) was one method of disarming the hostile criticism of Aunt Julia; and it seemed to be a tolerably successful method, for that ill-used lady was really very kind and forbearing. She made much of her niece, forcing her to lie down upon a sofa, insisting upon the immediate administration of homœopathic remedies, and heroically abstaining from any reference to the breach between them which had now been closed. Only, as was but natural, she had one or two questions to ask, which, after a time, she apologised for putting.

"I don't want to bother you, my dear," said she, "and, of course, if you have made no plans yet you cannot tell me what you are going to do; but it would be convenient to have some sort of idea of

what is required of me. Please don't say 'Nothing,' or I shall think you are still angry with me."

"I never have been angry with you, Aunt Julia," answered Veronica, sincerely enough. "I have given you reason to be angry with me, I know; but I don't see how I could have helped that. And how could I possibly say that I required nothing of you, after inviting myself to stay with you? As for plans, I think I must wait a little longer before I can speak of them. For the present, all I have to do is to see Mr. Walton to-morrow about some matters of business and to do a little shopping; so that I shall not need to inflict myself upon you for more than two days."

"But you will come back to me later, Veronica? Really there is no other course open to you that I can see. And something ought to be done about Broxham. If you don't want to live there the place must be let, I suppose—though I should hate to think of strangers inhabiting the poor old house!" added Mrs. Mansfield plaintively.

"I am afraid I could not make up my mind to live there," said Veronica, thinking it as well to pave the way for the distressing announcement which would have shortly to be made.

"Yet you must live *somewhere*, my dear. However, I renounce all attempt to influence you; my only wish is to be of service to you in any way that I can. I suppose you do receive some reports from Broxham? You are not leaving the servants to do exactly as they please?"

"Oh no; I get constant letters," answered Veronica, smiling; for she thought it very unlikely that Aunt Julia had taken no measures to assure herself of that fact.

After this there was a pause, which was broken by Veronica's inquiring, "Have you seen anything of Horace lately?"

"Yes; he was here a few days ago. Quite well, and full of engagements, as usual. Horace is always so immensely in request. I warned him that you were coming, so that he might not drop in again until the coast was clear."

"But I thought you said he harboured no feeling of resentment against me."

"Nor does he, dear fellow! I was thinking of you rather than of him. I felt that a meeting would be so very awkward for you!"

"There must be a little awkwardness the first time we meet, I suppose," answered Veronica; "but

we are almost sure to meet again some day, and I would much rather get it over at once and have done with it. Besides, I want to tell him how sorry I am for all that has happened."

"Wouldn't that sound a little ironical, dear? I mean, he might take it in that way—or he might think it rather bad taste. I will ask him to dine to-morrow, if you really wish it—though I doubt whether he would be able to come—but I should advise you to leave well alone."

Veronica made no rejoinder, and presently Mrs. Mansfield resumed—

"I presume you have heard that Dolly Cradock's engagement to Mr. Hornblower is announced. Poor Lady Louisa is in the seventh heaven, and Horace says he means to buy her the handsomest wedding present he can afford. I dare say he feels relieved, for she certainly did try very hard to ensnare him—as if he ever would have looked twice at her!"

"You considered her quite dangerous at Broxham, I remember," Veronica could not help remarking.

"Oh, not as a rival! I only thought, and I think still, that she did a good deal towards reconciling him to the little disappointment which was in store for him. The truth is that you made far too sure of

him, Veronica, and that is always such a mistake. I tried to warn you at the time; but you would not listen to me, and now you see! However, one can but hope that all has fallen out for the best, and I do trust that you won't distress yourself any more. You are looking anything but well, dear, I am sorry to see."

Now, it did not need any extraordinary clearness of vision to fathom the depths of this innocent and pellucid diplomacy. Mrs. Mansfield evidently misunderstood the nature of her niece's repentance, and flattered herself that by applying the spur to certain well-known feminine characteristics she could yet contrive to renew a repudiated compact. But although that much was obvious, it did not follow that she had misstated facts. It might very well be the case—indeed, it probably was the case—that Horace was not inconsolable; it was also by no means unlikely that, should his forgiveness be entreated, he would leap to Aunt Julia's erroneous conclusions. Upon the whole, therefore, Veronica reluctantly decided that her idea of seeking an interview with him must be abandoned. After all, it would, perhaps, sound a little ironical to say that she was sorry, and to inform him in the same breath

that she no longer had it in her power to make substantial amends for the injury that she had done him. It was impossible to foresee how he would receive such an announcement, or what he would imagine that she could mean by it. The unhappy thing, the irremediable thing, was that, as Joe had truly observed, poor Horace had "got the worst of it all round."

CHAPTER XXV.

JOSEPH'S HOST.

MRS. MANSFIELD alarmed Veronica a good deal at breakfast the next morning by proposing to accompany her to the lawyer's office.

"I know how independent you are, dear," said she; "but I really cannot feel that it is quite right for you to be roaming all over London alone, and as you choose to go to Mr. Walton, instead of sending for him—which I should have thought would have been rather more fitting than that he should send for you—I may as well take this opportunity of consulting him about some small affairs of my own, upon which I wish to have his opinion."

"Oh, but indeed you must not think of doing that!" protested Veronica. "It always gives you indigestion to go out immediately after breakfast, you know, and, of course, Mr. Walton can come to

you at any time. I will give him a message if you like. As for me, I shall not be unattended; my cousin, Joe Dimsdale, who travelled up with me yesterday, has promised to call and take me to the City. He—he has business there himself."

Mrs. Mansfield, who was secretly desirous of finding out what her niece's business with Mr. Walton might be, persisted for a few minutes, but finally had to give in, and was fortunately free from any suspicion as to the nature of Joe Dimsdale's business. She ended by remarking—

"I suppose you won't be very long; I understood that everything connected with your succession to the estate had been wound up, and surely Sutton is the proper person to deal with leases and all that sort of thing. What is the use of having an agent unless he takes such burdens off your shoulders?"

"There are some things which I think I ought to go into myself," answered Veronica disingenuously; "but I doubt whether I shall have to trouble Mr. Walton after to-day."

"Well, at all events," observed Mrs. Mansfield, giving utterance to the thought that was in her mind before she could stop herself, "Mr. Walton may be trusted to prevent you from doing anything rash

or foolish. Indeed, there isn't very much that you *can* do now."

Veronica burst into one of her sudden, irrepressible laughs. She was not in a particularly merry mood; but the contrast between this misplaced confidence and the dismay with which Aunt Julia would subsequently learn of what rashness and foolishness she was still capable overpowered her for the moment. Luckily the entrance of the butler, who came to announce that a young gentleman was waiting for her at the door, enabled her to take to her heels without giving the explanation which Mrs. Mansfield's open eyes and mouth demanded.

"Jump in, Joseph!" she said, as she hurriedly entered the hansom beside which her cousin was standing. "Make haste, or we shall have Aunt Julia starting in pursuit. It has already begun to dawn upon her that I am up to no good."

"Leave her to me," returned Joe placidly; "I'll undertake to say that no old woman shall divert your humble servant from his purpose. When I once make up my mind to a thing I pretty generally contrive to carry it through."

Veronica thought that on the present occasion it was rather more a question of her mind and her

purpose than her companion's, but she said nothing, and before they had been driven very far on their way it appeared that even the self-complacent Joe was not infallible.

"Confound it all!" he ejaculated suddenly, looking up from the pages of a note-book which he had been consulting. "Here's a nuisance! I say, Veronica, will it matter if we keep that old lawyer chap waiting a short time?"

"I don't suppose he will like it," answered Veronica; "but we shall be sure to find him at his office up to five o'clock in the afternoon, I believe. What is the matter?"

"It's awfully stupid of me; but I have got to see a man this morning, and if I don't go at once I shall miss him, because he was to leave town at half-past eleven. Would you mind waiting for me? I shan't be more than twenty minutes or half an hour at the outside."

Veronica did not mind waiting, but she did rather object to returning to South Audley Street, and when she suggested that she might sit in the hansom at his friend's door Joe declared decisively that that wouldn't do at all.

"I'll tell you what you might do," he said sud-

denly; "you might come to that chap's rooms where I'm staying and wait for me there. He always breakfasts at his club, so you'll have the place to yourself; and, even if he should turn up before I come back, it won't matter. He knows all about you."

Veronica assented more readily than most young ladies would have done to a proposal in which she saw nothing out of the way. Joe's host, she presumed, would be willing to give her shelter for a quarter of an hour, and she very much preferred being indebted to him for so ordinary an act of civility to risking a renewal of her conversation with Aunt Julia. For the rest, she was not at all likely to encounter that unknown gentleman. The snug little bachelor's apartment in the neighbourhood of St. James's Street into which she was presently conducted by Joe was, as he had anticipated that it would be, untenanted; and after she had been left there with an illustrated paper to while away the time, she amused herself by speculating upon what manner of man the usual occupier of the premises might be.

Evidently a sporting man, to judge by the prints, crayons and water-colours with which the walls

were covered, and which represented hunting and racing scenes alone. Nevertheless, a man who was not without refined tastes, nor even destitute of literary culture: for the furniture showed signs of having been carefully selected, the colours were subdued and well assorted, and upon the tables lay quite a large number of books such as sporting persons seldom trouble themselves to open. Some of these, it was true, looked suspiciously new, while the leaves of a few had not even been cut; but a book-marker was sticking in "Sartor Resartus," and that this work had been honestly perused, not merely skimmed through, was plain from the rumpled condition of its pages. Veronica picked up the volume and glanced at it with a smile, remembering how, in the days when Horace had been eager to profit by her instructions, she had placed it upon her list of books to be read, and how he had confessed that, although he found Carlyle splendid in certain passages, there were others over which he had cudgelled his brains in vain to discover what the writer was driving at. Poor Horace! he had always been modest, always sincere, always ready to give people whom he did not understand credit for knowing more than he did—which could hardly

be said with truth for some of the authors with whose productions he had been invited to make himself acquainted. As much, assuredly, could not be said for Mr. Cyril Mostyn, a copy of whose "Essays on the Literature of the Victorian Era" lay close at hand. Still, it was rather presumptuous of Joseph's friend to have disfigured this standard work by scrawling a gross caricature of the famous poet and critic upon the flyleaf, and to have stigmatised the well-weighed exordium by scribbling "Conceited ass!" in pencil on the margin.

"This young gentleman wants taking down a peg," said Veronica to herself. "I almost wish he would come in, so that I might ask him what he means by it."

As if in answer to her hasty aspiration, the street door was slammed at that moment, and a step was heard ascending the staircase.

"Oh, here he comes!" thought Veronica. "Well, I shall certainly tell him that there are more conceited asses than one in the world, and that, whatever Mr. Mostyn may be in private life, his writings at least are entitled to respect."

But she said nothing of that sort when the right-

ful owner of the room which she had invaded and the book which she held in her hand stood before her, every feature of his face expressing the most profound amazement. What she did say was, "Good gracious! Do *you* live here?"

"Of course I live here," Horace Trevor replied. "But—but——"

"But you would be glad to know what *I* am doing here, I suppose," suggested Veronica, recovering her self-possession, as it dawned upon her that she had been made the subject of a wily stratagem. "It was Joe who brought me; he wanted me to wait a quarter of an hour for him somewhere, and he never mentioned that you were the friend with whom he was staying. No doubt he has done this on purpose, and I am sure he meant kindly. Indeed, it really was kind of him, for I was most anxious to see you again, Horace."

Horace did not look as if he had experienced any similar anxiety.

"Won't you sit down," he said stiffly. "I dare say Joe will be back presently. Of course, I shouldn't have come in if I had had the least idea that you were here."

"I will not be quarrelled with," returned Veronica

resolutely. "I am quite ready to beg your pardon, if you think I ought—in a way, I think so myself. But you must know how miserable it has always made me to have supplanted you, and if you have any sense of justice at all, you cannot help admitting that I have tried my utmost to make restitution."

"And goodness knows," exclaimed Horace. "I have tried my utmost to convince you that there never was or could be any question of restitution in the matter! You wouldn't speak in that way if you knew how—how—well, I can't find any other word for it—how offensive it is to me!"

"Offensive is not a very pretty word to use, I must say," remarked Veronica, colouring slightly; "but, however offensive I may be, I am determined not to be offended, and if you won't take the estate, Horace, and don't wish to take it—as I quite believe that you don't—why should you go on being angry with me?"

Horace bit his lip and made no immediate reply. At length he remarked: "I don't know whether you are capable of imagining yourself in my place—I suppose you aren't, or you would never have asked such a question. But don't you think it would make you a little bit angry if the man whom you

love best in the world were to take it for granted that he could atone for having kicked you downstairs by offering you pecuniary compensation ?"

"That is neither a fair nor a true way of putting it," Veronica returned. "You required no compensation for having been released from a woman who, as you and Dolly Cradock knew very well, could never have been formed into the sort of wife whom you ought to marry. It never entered into my head to offer you compensation. All I begged of you was to take the property which was already yours by rights, and which I myself care so little about that, in default of any other claimant, I have decided to make it over to Joe. Perhaps he has told you that he and I have come up to London for that purpose."

Horace nodded. "Yes, he told me last night what you were contemplating. I must confess I was surprised and sorry to hear of it. However, it is no affair of mine."

"It ought to be ; only you won't allow it to be. You mean, of course, that you are sorry on my account, and that you think I am acting foolishly. That is what everybody will think, and I am quite prepared for censure and ridicule, and even scolding.

But I don't see why I should be deserted by my friends because I am going to be poor, instead of rich, and I did hope that you would consent to be one of my friends, in spite of all."

"I am sure," answered Horace, a little softened by this appeal, though he was fully alive to its absurdity, "there can be nobody living who can be more anxious to serve you than I am, Veronica, and I wouldn't for the world have you think that I want to sulk; still, when you talk about friendship—well, honestly, I don't see how that is possible between you and me. Anyhow, I am certain that I could never be friends with your husband."

"But I haven't got a husband."

"You will have one soon. Unless, indeed, he is choked off by this sudden surrender of your fortune to a third person, as he very likely will be; for if ever there was a man who knew on which side his bread was buttered, it is the great and good Mr. Cyril Mostyn."

"If you have heard anything about Mr. Mostyn," said Veronica, "you must have heard that he has already been choked off, as you call it. Joe had no business to repeat that to you, though, after promising to hold his tongue."

"Joe hasn't mentioned the fellow's name to me. I wasn't so blind that I couldn't see what his little game was, and I am glad, for your sake, that he has given it up. All the same, I should like to take a running kick at him—which he deserves."

"I don't think that he deserves such treatment," said Veronica, laughing, as a rapid vision of Mr. Mostyn being propelled into space by the application of one of Horace's shooting-boots flashed before her. "He is no worse than everybody else. Everybody, except, perhaps, you and I, takes a very practical view of life when it comes to be a question of pounds, shillings and pence. That is one reason why we ought to be able to shake hands."

Horace heaved a sigh. "Oh, I am ready to shake hands, if that's all," he answered.

"Only you won't forgive and forget."

"Yes, I will. At least I'll forgive. I won't forgive that fellow Joe, though—never was so disappointed in a boy in my life! My opinion is that he ought to be ashamed of himself, and so I've told him."

"But he is only taking Broxham to oblige me."

"Yes; that's what he has the impudence to say. But I can't quite swallow that story. He wouldn't have found shelter under this humble roof if I had

known what his errand was, I can tell him! And, not content with collaring the land, he demands a big sum down in hard cash besides, I understand."

"Of course it sounds grasping," agreed Veronica; "but, as a matter of fact, the place can't be kept up without a sufficient income. I remember Lord Chippenham telling me that I should not find the whole fortune I had inherited at all too much."

"And do you mean to say that you are going to bestow all your fortune upon that young rascal?"

"Not the whole of it; I explained to him that I couldn't do that. We are going to talk things over with Mr. Walton now, and see how much can be spared."

"It is easy to foretell how this will end," remarked Horace lugubriously; "you will make a pauper of yourself, and nobody will thank you. Oh, Veronica, why couldn't you let things be! I am not good enough for you, and you don't care for me—that's an answer, of course. But at least I could have given you a home and protection; and certainly no one will ever love you more than I do."

"But are you quite sure that you do love me, Horace?" asked Veronica gently, after a pause. "Aunt Julia says——"

"Aunt Julia be hanged! I will tell you this, Veronica; I am as sure of loving you to my dying day as I am that it will never be in my power again to ask you to be my wife. No; not even if, by an impossibility, you should change your mind and come to care for me. For, as you say, one is bound to take a practical view of the pounds, shillings and pence question, and my income is only just enough to keep a bachelor alive upon."

Veronica had seated herself in Horace's arm-chair, and was pressing her finger-tips together thoughtfully. There was something which she wanted to say—something which she had only at that moment realised that she ought, perhaps, to say. Yet it seemed doubtful whether she would not do a great deal better to hold her peace. The young man, meanwhile, had walked to the window, and was standing, with his back turned towards her, staring out into the street.

"Horace," she began at length timidly, "I should like you to know the whole truth. I still think I did right to set you free; I still think that, if only Dolly Cradock could somehow have been put into my place, you would have been far happier with her than you ever could have been with me; I still see—I

can't help seeing—that we are not suited to one another. But I know—and, if you will believe me, I never did know it until now—at least, not for certain, I have only had occasional sort of suspicions that it might be so—I know now that I should have been happy with you, in spite of all."

Horace darted back from the window like a hare, and stood before her with dilated eyes of amazement. "Veronica," he stammered, "do you know what you are saying? Do you really mean——"

"Oh, no; not that!" she answered, jumping up hastily and placing the chair between her and her interrogator; "pray don't imagine that I have changed my mind once more, and that I want to undo what has been done. Only I felt that I must tell you that—that——"

"That you love me, Veronica!"

"I don't think I was going to say quite that," answered Veronica, still edging away; "but it doesn't really matter. You must see yourself that, whatever you may wish for the moment, and however anxious you may be to do a dreadfully foolish thing, that chapter is closed. I can't go back from my word to Joe; I can't keep the property which I have promised to give up to him."

"Let him take it, and welcome!" cried Horace; "I'm sure *I* don't want the place, if you don't, and —I say, Veronica, I wish you wouldn't run about the room like that; you make me so giddy I can't speak!"

"It isn't in the least desirable that you should speak until you can talk rationally," answered Veronica; "but I will stop running about if you will be good enough to stand still and listen to me for one moment."

Horace at once became rigid and motionless. "All right," he answered; "I'm listening. Only it's sheer waste of time to repeat that we are not suited to one another. Let me remind you of what you said that afternoon in the library at Broxham. Our having nothing in common wouldn't have mattered, if you remember, according to you, so long as we were in love with one another."

"I may have said so, though I can't recollect it; but let me remind you of what you said not five minutes ago. It was never to be in your power again to ask me to be your wife, even if I came to care for you: because there wouldn't be money enough."

"Ah, but when I said that I made sure that you

never would care for me. And, look here, Veronica —of course we should be awfully poor; but by putting our means together—and surely you have a right to keep a few hundreds a year for yourself—we should have enough to live upon. Are you so afraid of poverty?"

"Not for myself, perhaps; but I should be very much afraid of it for you. How long would you be happy, do you think, without even a horse to ride?"

"I should be happy," answered this infatuated young man decisively, "just as long as you were. Happiness for me means being with you, Veronica —that and nothing else. Of course, I'm fond of hunting, and you're fond of—well, poetry and literature and all that; but if I were told that I should never have another day with the hounds after marrying you I shouldn't wince—upon my word and honour I shouldn't. I'd pay that price and a longer one, too, without thinking twice about it. I wonder whether you would pay the price of living in a small house upon small means with an ignoramus who prefers a page of Jorrocks to all the volumes that Mr. Cyril Mostyn has ever turned out!"

Veronica looked at him with a smile, and he read

in her eyes the answer which she still hesitated to return verbally. He advanced a few paces towards her, and this time she did not draw back. She only murmured, "I know it is all wrong! It is clean against reason and common-sense!"

"That's just the beauty of it!" cried Horace exultantly; "nobody will be able to accuse us now of marrying for any reason at all except the best of reasons."

And during the half-hour that followed it never occurred to either of these self-engrossed persons to wonder what had become of Joe Dimsdale, or to recollect the serious inconvenience to which a busy solicitor is apt to be put when his clients fail to keep their appointments.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FELICITATIONS.

Joe mounted the stairs very slowly, making a good deal of unnecessary noise about it, and met with great apparent difficulty in turning the door-handle. This youth may have had his faults; but it must be acknowledged that he was dowered with a foresight and discretion beyond his years. When he at length succeeded in effecting an entrance, Horace and Veronica were seated some little distance apart and had the air of having been engaged in polite conversation. The former started up, shook his fist and grinned; though he could not help looking a little foolish.

"You young ruffian!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean by playing me such a trick as this, eh?"

"My dear Trevor," answered Joe composedly,

"that strikes me as a somewhat superfluous question. What I meant by it is precisely what has come of it —neither more nor less than that. As a general thing," added Joe modestly, "I know what I mean; and what I mean I do. Sorry not to be able to say as much for certain other folks who shall be nameless."

Veronica rose and walked quickly across the room towards him, stretching out her arms.

"Dear Joseph!" she exclaimed, "you were right all along, and I wish I had listened to you, instead of thinking that I knew better. And now—oh, how can I thank you!"

"Hi! Stop!—don't do that!" shouted Joe, jumping back in much alarm. "I have a sincere respect for you, Veronica, but I don't want to be kissed, thanks. That sort of thing isn't done any longer in the best families, as you must be aware. In these days salutes are only bestowed upon people who aren't blood relations."

"You shall not be embraced, then, you rude boy!" returned Veronica, laughing. "I suppose there is no offence in my telling you that you are a darling, though. If you hadn't played us this trick, as Horace rather ungratefully calls it, I don't know what would

have become of me! Perhaps I should never have found out that I wished to marry Horace, and almost certainly I should never have married him."

Joe raised his eyebrows, dropped the corners of his mouth and whistled. "Hullo!" he ejaculated, "this is serious, this is! A reconciliation was all very well, and any little trouble that I may have been put to in bringing it about I should be the last to grudge; but a marriage—well, I don't know so much about a marriage. I dare say you have settled it all very comfortably between you; but I should like to know what part I am expected to play in this touching final scene."

"Why, the part that you have accepted, of course," answered Veronica. "Did you think that I was going to display my gratitude by telling you that, after all, I had decided to keep Broxham for myself?"

"I confess that it wouldn't have surprised me if you had, Veronica; the situation, you see, isn't what it was. At the same time I must say that in my opinion a bargain ought to be a bargain, and although I was very anxious to see you and Trevor friends again, perhaps I shouldn't have acted quite as I have done if I could have foreseen what advan-

tage you would take of my little stratagem. How was I to foresee it when you both assured me again and again that you had done with one another for ever? You may say that I ought not to consider my own selfish interests; but——"

"But indeed, Joe," protested Veronica, in a distressed voice, "we never for a moment contemplated breaking faith with you. Did we, Horace?"

"I am quite sure *you* never did, at any rate," answered Horace, conscious that he had been unable to give his cordial approval to her plan of self-spoliation, "and your wishes are mine."

"H'm!" grunted Joe, glancing from one to the other and stroking his chin meditatively; "I wonder whether you realize what this means, you two. I warned you from the first, you know, Veronica, that an estate without an income would be no good to me, and by the time that I have relieved you of what will be strictly necessary you will be a poor woman, I am afraid. Mind, I shan't complain if you decide to be off your bargain; I only say that half measures will be useless."

"I am not dreaming of half measures," Veronica declared. "I know well enough that I shall be poor, and I *want* to be poor! So does Horace. I

doubt whether he would have had anything to say to me if I had remained rich."

"Really? Well, this ought to convince you, at all events, that he is a rather better chap than you took him for. Likewise it shows that even the very best judges may sometimes be deceived in a man. I must own that, after the way in which Trevor jumped down my throat last night, I should never have supposed that he wanted you to be poor. Why, there was hardly a bad name in the English language that he didn't throw at my head!—and all because of my readiness to do you a favour!"

"Oh, well; we needn't go into that," said Horace, reddening a little. "I thought at the time that you ought not to have taken advantage of Veronica's determination to impoverish herself; but circumstances alter cases, and, as I told you just now, her wishes are mine."

"So I may take it that we have your full assent to the proposed arrangement?" observed Joe interrogatively.

Horace nodded. "Certainly you have," he replied.

"That's all right, then. What a funny thing that you should have become so indifferent to wealth all of a sudden and that I should have developed such a

clear appreciation of its value! This is the result of falling in love, I suppose. Heaven grant that, when my time comes, I may not find it quite so expensive a luxury! Well, Veronica, how soon will it suit you to look up the patient Walton?"

"This moment, if you are ready," answered Veronica with alacrity.

"I'm afraid we can't go now. Just look at the clock, and you will see that by the time we could reach Lincoln's Inn Fields the good man would probably have gone out to get his lunch somewhere, cursing you for your unpunctuality. No; you had better make a fresh appointment with him, accompanied by a suitable apology; and, talking of apologies, this seems to be about as appropriate a moment as another for you and Trevor to go down upon your knees and beg my pardon."

"What for?" asked Horace, who, to tell the truth, was not best pleased with Joe's bantering tone.

"He wants to know what for, if you please! Here's a nice sort of a fellow to have for a friend! It never strikes him that he has been insulting me grossly by believing that I have been in earnest all this time; he doesn't give me credit for having a particle of honesty or decency in my whole compo-

sition! I don't so much wonder at Veronica; I have more than once had occasion to notice before now that, for a clever woman, she is quite amazingly devoid of ordinary intelligence. But I really did hope that you knew better, Trevor, than to mistake a young man of hitherto unblemished character for a highway robber. My one consolation is that I have had a brilliant success. You can't get rid of your property now, and neither of you can go on any longer indulging in ridiculous suspicions about the other. Now beg my pardon, please, and I'll try to forgive you."

As a matter of course, both Horace and Veronica declared that this would never do. They were quite willing, they said, to humble themselves in the dust before their benefactor, they even admitted that they had to some extent misjudged him; but they were clearly of opinion that the existing arrangement could not now be cancelled. There were many good reasons why it should be maintained, and these they proceeded to state, while Joe, having asked permission to light his pipe, threw himself down in an easy chair and listened with exemplary patience.

"Have you quite done?" he inquired at length.

"Yes, I believe so," answered Horace; "if you don't understand by this time what my position is, I can't hope to make you."

"Anything more to say, Veronica?"

Veronica signified that she also had exhausted her stock of convincing arguments.

"All right. Then let me tell you, my good friends, that I'll see you at Jericho beyond Jordan before I comply with your cool request. I have already had the honour to inform one of you that I have no personal ambition to become a land-owner, and what you propose to do is simply to thrust responsibilities upon me which properly belong to you, in order that you may have the right to swagger about your disinterestedness. Much obliged, but I don't see it. It doesn't make the slightest odds to me whether Broxham belongs to Mr. or Mrs. Horace Trevor. You had better fight out that question between you. All I know is that it will never be the property of Joseph Dimsdale, Esquire. At the same time, if you feel that you owe me some substantial acknowledgment of my services—and, not to affect mock modesty, I must say that I think you do—you might bear in mind what my real ambition is. As a land-agent, I

believe that I should do justice to myself and my employers, and old Sutton is getting past his work. Put me into old Sutton's berth, my dears, and all shall be forgiven. I accept your apologies, and I think that what you have gone through will serve as a lesson to you not to behave like absolute fools for the future."

They could hardly have escaped falling under that condemnation, had they offered any further resistance, and the condemnation (if such it were) which their friends and acquaintances did not fail subsequently to pass upon them of having been at once too wise and too weak to hold out against the force of circumstances was a thing to be borne with philosophy. Each knew what to think of the other; so that it was scarcely a subject for profound unhappiness that sundry persons should declare themselves incapable of knowing what to think. Mrs. Mansfield, at all events, was not numbered among these bewildered outsiders.

"If you expect me to express the least astonishment, my dear," she said tranquilly to Veronica later in the day, "I am afraid I must disappoint you. I foresaw that you would come to your senses soon; and very much indebted you ought to feel to

that young cousin of yours for having given you this opportunity. As for dear Horace, he has behaved quite admirably throughout. Some people may call him lucky; but I shall always think the good luck is all on your side."

A somewhat similar opinion was entertained and enunciated by Miss Dolly Cradock, who spared half an hour from the purchase of her trousseau to call in South Audley Street and congratulate her re-affianced friend.

"There's no use in fighting against destiny," she was pleased to say; "if there were, I dare say I shouldn't be the future Mrs. Hornblower, and I dare say you wouldn't be the future Mrs. Trevor, my dear Veronica. But I don't complain of my destiny, and I'm sure you have no reason to complain of yours. It would have served you right to be taken at your word; but then, again, it would have been rather rough on him to be cut out of the estate. Don't try riding to hounds with him, though—if you'll accept a word of advice from a sincere well-wisher—and don't make him yawn his poor head off by reading poetry to him. Give him plenty of tether and you'll find him as good a little man as there is. The whole secret of matrimony, you may depend

upon it, is to give as much as you can and take all you can get."

A much more gracefully worded form of felicitation reached Veronica from Paris, whence Mr. Cyril Mostyn wrote to give utterance to the mixed feelings with which he had heard of his pupil's last change of plans. A suggestion of mild melancholy pervaded a composition of which the phraseology left nothing to be desired, and which was in all respects a model of good taste. The writer evidently recognised that the time for warnings and remonstrances had gone by; he accepted the inevitable without indiscreet inquiry or comment; his good wishes were quite paternal in tone and were marred by no faintest allusion to the circumstances under which he had parted from his fair correspondent; if an under-current of misgiving was perceptible in his harmonious periods, it was not of a nature to cause offence.

"For a man of my age," he remarked, "life can have no further surprises, illusions or disillusions in store; but to you, who are as yet upon the mere threshold of experience, it is probable—even, I fear, certain—that troubles will come. Then you will instinctively fall back, as I have done many and

many a time, upon art, the one unfailing, inexhaustible consolation. Then you will, perhaps, call to mind a few of the technical hints which it has been the greatest privilege of a veteran to convey to a neophyte. Is it too much to hope that then also you will think not unkindly of one who will ever remain your sincere and attached friend?"

Well, it was easy enough to think kindly of Mr. Mostyn, although, in Veronica's opinion, his technical instruction was very unlikely to be utilised after the fashion referred to. That she could ever stand in need of any other consolation than Horace could give her she did not believe, and that, even if she should, she would find it in the exercise of an art with which she had but played, seemed to her in the last degree improbable. But nobody's life can be written while he or she lives; and Veronica, having a sound constitution, may be expected to live for a great many years yet.

THE END.

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